

THE HEROINES OF GEORGE MEREDITH

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The Countess Livia

THE AMAZING MARRIAGE

THE HEROINES OF GEORGE MEREDITH

WITH TWENTY MINIATURES IN COLOURS

BY
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HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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FRONTISPIECE

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INTRODUCTION

George Meredith's Allegiance to Feminism.

“WOMEN have us back to the conditions of primitive man, or they shoot us higher than the topmost star. But it is as we please. Let them tell us what we are to them; for us, they are our back and front of life: the poet's Lesbia, the poet's Beatrice; ours is the choice. And were it proved that some of the bright things are in the pay of Darkness, with the stamp of his coin on their palms, and that some are the very angels we hear sung of, not the less might we say that they find us out, they have us by our leanings. They are to us what we hold of best or worst within.”

So wrote George Meredith in *The Egoist*, in a chapter devoted to the excogitations of that amazing person in an incredible position. It is a chapter illustrative of the Meredithian method of plumbing

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the feelings of the man through woman. *They are to us what we hold of best and worst within.* Meredith's men are of sufficiently diverse metal to flash us splendid contrasts when brought strikingly together ; but at a deliberate review we find that, with scarcely an exception, Meredith's man is conditioned by his women ; and through them, and through his relations with them (in the widest sense of the word) is he propounded and revealed to us. They are to him the scientist's lamp before which he must pass that it may shadow forth for us all that is best and worst within him.

Meredith's whole-hearted allegiance to the cause of feminism cannot but excite our utmost admiration. It was with him no trumpet to be blown for the sake of demanding or of retaining his hold upon our attention ; nor need we ask ourselves whether it was that he regarded its furtherance in the light of a duty :

Duty soon tires, love goes all the way.

His enthusiasm carries us along with him ; he touches us, he convinces us ; and it is because he is himself so deeply touched, so desperately convinced.

In Mr. J. A. Hammerton's delightful book (*George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism*) he writes :—

“Since the little printer of Salisbury Square en-
chained the whole feminine world of his time with his

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Pamela and his Clarissa, no novelist has rivalled Meredith in the appeal to femininity. . . . Richardson most faithfully interpreted the contemporary feminine character; Meredith has sought to breathe into woman a larger life." And indeed Meredith has created for us women of a larger life: they cannot be matched outside Shakespeare. They are a distinguished company that has been aptly termed by James Thomson, the poet, "the aristocracy of the imagination," and with them, as with all the greatest of the wonder-people of the imagination, we scarcely need close our eyes, and we have them with us, more real than reality.

"I have not studied women more closely than I have men," wrote Meredith, "but with more affection, a deeper interest in their enfranchisement and development." For him they were nearer than men to Nature. His men are marvellous studies, and splendidly true to life; but his uncanny insight into the women's minds, and his intuitive understanding both of their feelings and of the secret well-springs of their actions, compel us to regard them as the fruit of his highest inspiration.

"Her heart was at the head of her thoughts and led the file," is a penetrating description that he applies to one of our best friends—not necessarily in the camp of the Amazon advance-guard—and that strikes upon a broad truth with a clarion ring that proclaims him master of the secret of the essential difference between the mind

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of woman and the mind of man. There is something of it in *The Princess*:—

For woman is not undeveloped man,
But diverse; could we make her as the man,
Sweet love were slain: his dearest bond is this,
Not like to like, but like in difference.
Yet in the long years liker must they grow;
The man be more of woman, she of man;
He gain in sweetness and in moral height,
Nor lose the wrestling thews that throw the world;
She mental breadth, nor fail in childward care,
Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind;
Till at the last she set herself to man,
Like perfect music unto noble words.

The Wooing and the Mating of his Heroines.

WITH Tennyson's subtly sweet music in our ears, we naturally throw a glance into the flower-garden of the Meredith heroines, to see which of them "set herself to man, like perfect music unto noble words." One is distressed to find the survey proving, as we progress, a heartbreaking one; and even with them of whom such a phrase might honestly be written, and whose history, as we know it, records them truly mated, the ordeals through which they have been compelled to pass on their road to happiness are too deeply and tragically impressed upon our memory for us to tolerate the idea of their perpension in a summary.

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Let us rather turn to the consideration of the first meeting of our heroines and their true lovers, when we perceive love-at-sight to be a corner stone in the temple of the Meredith philosophy.

Eagle-swift was the coming of love to Lucy and Richard Feverel; but perhaps the most extraordinary instance of love-at-sight that recurs to one's mind is the case of the "Old Buccaneer" and the beautiful Countess Fanny (in *The Amazing Marriage*). Possibly this is traceable in part to the whimsical extravagance of the mode of its recounting by Dame Gossip; but one need only, for further examples, think of Aminta, Renée, Ottilia, and others—not to mention the men—who will convince us, if we need convincing, that

The coming of love is lightning-swift;
Only a word, or a touch of the hand,
Or haply only a look,
And never a word spoken;
And lo! a shooting star across the heavens,
And all the world is transfigured!

It will not be uninteresting to enquire into the signs which, according to Meredith, distinguish the true passion from the mere ephemeral. In the novels opportunity is not wanting to enable us to make such a study, and it has been so excellently done by the French critic, M. Légouis, that I quote a paragraph from his article included in Mr. J. A. Hammerton's book already

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mentioned. This then, is how we may recognise true lovers :—

“First of all, a humility common to the two, the enraptured reflection of each in respect to the nature of the other, delight in seeing that nature unfold itself freely, fear of touching it lest it should be shaken or lessened, the feeling that one’s own nature is of small account and that the nobler is that which one contemplates. The true lover loves the very soul of his adored one, loves it in her and for her sake, loves it distinct and sometimes wholly apart from her, as if by that means he could see her more perfectly as she is, delighting in her variety.”

This is of particular interest coming, as it does, from the artistic appreciation of the English novelist by the distinguished French *littérateur*.

The Love-Scenes and their Settings.

MEREDITH’S love scenes are of infinite beauty, and their settings are no less distinguished than are the love-scenes themselves. In the several notes to the various heroines that I have painted, I have been permitted to include some memorable examples of each. If one may strip the expression of any suggestion of the stage—for they are not of the stage, but all nature—I should like to write that he was a master of

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love-scenery. The treasures of the imagination upon which he draws in the painting of the landscapes through which he leads us, making us participators with him in these delicious meetings, are such as are available only to a poet. Meredith was of course a poet before he became a novelist also, and my personal opinion is with those that hold that he was never more a poet than in his novels.

He could exert the double vision to which Mrs. Browning refers in *Aurora Leigh* as being essential for a poet's eyes:—

To see near things as comprehensively
As if afar they took their point of sight,
And distant things as intimately deep
As if they touched them.

He was possessed of an intimate knowledge of the woodland and of the denizens of the woodland's shy recesses; and again and again in his landscape has he given us the instinctive note to complete a harmony or to reveal a contrast needed to transform a sylvan picture to a poem. With a few magic words he can lead you into the woods and lose you there; he will encircle you about with the shafts of mighty beeches that arch high in the upper darkness like the pillars of a Gothic cathedral, all filled with a holy stillness, until he choose to break it with, perhaps, the call of the night-jar, or with the sweep of the white-owl's wing.

Who that has ever been there with Lucy but loves the woods bordering on Raynham—you can see them

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from the Abbey, across the meadows—where Richard found her, and left her “empty of his heart?” Who but loves to picture the tardy little stream—all overhung as it is—that slips through the park at Beckley Court, beside which Rose Jocelyn waited for Evan’s “forgiveness,” and saw not the moon of silver rising through the aspens? Or who can ever forget the enchanted wood near Brookfield, where first we heard our Sandra singing to the night?

It would be easy to multiply examples of love-scenery, all touched in with the hand of the master; and as it is with Nature and her colours, so is it with the arts and with the legends of all ages; for an allusion seems ever to be in apt attendance at his hand to give accent alike to a situation or to a description. There is a passage in Oscar Wilde’s *English Renaissance of Art* that I propose to quote—the courtesy of Mr. Robert Ross, his literary executor, enables me to include this and the other quotations from his works—It sums the attitude and function of the poet thus:—

“The poet is the spectator of all time and of all existence. For him no form is obsolete, no subject out of date; rather, whatever of life and passion the world has known . . . all lies before him like an open scroll, all is still instinct with beautiful life. He will take of it what is salutary for his own spirit, no more; choosing some facts and rejecting others with the calm artistic

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control of one who is in possession of the secret of beauty."

Wilde might well have penned this passage with George Meredith in his mind, so wide was the wing of his imagination, so penetrating the vision that in a glance could embrace the ages.

The Pictorial Aspect of his Heroines.

LEAVING landscapes and settings, beautiful though they be, let us pass to the consideration of our heroines in their personal pictorial aspect. "Women are pictures," said Lord Illingworth, "if you want to know what a woman really means; look at her, don't listen to her."

If we intently regard the portrait of a great or striking personality, we find ourselves, if the painter be equal to his subject, involuntarily drawn to the eyes: he has intentionally led us to them that they may speak to us, for pictured lips say nothing. It may be that they have but just finished speaking, perhaps saying something deep or something adorable that has left on them its impress or its shadow; or they may appear to be on the very verge of giving utterance to an idea; but they will never utter it: pictured lips are mute. But the eyes can speak, and the most casual survey of a group of one's Meredith-favourites reminds us that

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they have eyes that not only speak, but that say many different things.

The quick human eye is in itself an exquisite thing, scarcely capable of being spoiled except by its setting. Meredith lets us know his heroines' eyes most frequently from what they say and mean, but occasionally he gives us their purely pictorial aspect. Thus we remember "large, long, grey eyes, dimly rimmed purest water-grey, lucid within the ring beneath the arch of lashes." Diana Warwick had "eyes like stars of winter's night," and it is noteworthy that she, of all the Meredith-heroines, is the only one possessed of beauty on strictly classic lines. He was, nevertheless, no niggard in endowing them with beauty, and if it be of a kind that has little or no pretention to rigid correctness, it is too brim-full of meaning for mere prettiness. To one he gives eyes filled with mystery that provokes to a plunge; another has a gaze that welcomes you with intent kindness; and to a third he gives the eyes that smile in repose—perhaps an embarrassment to their owner. But I do not propose to catalogue his delineations of their perceptible properties, though they are both picturesque and illuminating, merely remarking that he has a preference for features that are "playfellows of one another" rather than regular disciplinarians.

When he has a mind to spare a few moments for mere trappings, none can dress a damsel in more delicious

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raiment than he. You will recollect how Clara Middleton “wore a dress cunning to embrace the shape and flutter loose about it in the spirit of a summer’s day. Calypso-clad, Dr. Middleton would have called her”—and would at the same time have straight-jacketed the enthusiasm that would, save for his doctorial dictum, have been set bubbling in every man of us at the sight of her.

I have no intention of dwelling upon this side-issue of mere millinery ; but cannot pass from it without recalling a paragraph from *Diana of the Crossways*, which appeals to one as the perfect exemplar. Diana Warwick was at Rovio, and was bent upon one of those early-morning climbs in the mountains that so sturdily appealed to Meredith’s sense of physical enjoyment. “She was dressed in some texture of the hue of lavender. A violet scarf loosely knotted over the bosom opened on her throat. The loop of her black hair curved under a hat of grey beaver, . . . memorably radiant was her face Some sweet wild cyclamen flowers were at her breast. She held in her left hand a bunch of buds and blown cups of the pale purplemeadow crocus.”

Is it not an exquisite colour-harmony that Meredith has made ? Through all his lavenders and purples we are insensibly led up to the carnation-flush of her cheeks, the colour that Ruskin called the most beautiful in nature : and in the radiance of the face, Meredith has found the inservient note, has given it emphasis and made it memorable.

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Their Gift of Brains.

IT is probably the gift of brains that is the most insistent distinction of Meredith's heroines, more especially among his later creations; but it will be my better plan to confine this fascinating subject here within the narrowest limits, and duly allow each in her turn to make her own impression in her proper place.

In the *Essay in Comedy*, after discussing his two especial favourites of the Comedy of Manners, Congreve's Millamant and Molière's Célimène, we find Meredith employing the *reductio ad absurdum* and arriving at this:—

“But those two ravishing women, so copious and so choice of speech, who fence with men and pass their guard, are heartless! Is it not preferable to be the pretty idiot, the passive beauty, the adorable bundle of caprices, very feminine, very sympathetic, of romantic and sentimental fiction? Our women are taught to think so.”

His rejoinder that they are “not necessarily heartless from being clear-sighted” is a truth that he has upheld and illustrated in splendid profusion throughout his works. Brains his women possess; not brains of any single pattern, but brains of multiple diversity. Readiness with the apt word is one of the gifts of which Meredith has been notoriously lavish. To some he has given crystal wit, and, in varying degrees, facility in word-

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fencing of that alert and occasionally elliptical kind that is his monopoly, and could no more emanate from another source than could the lines spoken by Portia or Beatrice be aught but pure Shakespeare.

In the separate note attached to each of the heroines whom I have painted, characteristic passages from the novels are included, with the two-fold object of introducing them to such readers as have yet to make their acquaintance, and of recalling to the appreciation of their friends some of the delightful things said by them or said of them.

From *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, I have chosen Lucy and Mrs. Bella Mount; and the courtesy of the publishers has enabled me to include part of the delicious love-scene entitled "A diversion played upon a penny whistle."

From *Evan Harrington*, we have the ineffable Countess de Saldar, her sister Caroline, and staunch little Rose Jocelyn, whose love-scene, from which I quote, is a worthy pendant to that of Lucy and Richard.

From *Sandra Belloni*, I have taken none but the heroine; but *Vittoria*, its sequel, gives us the Italian aristocrat, Laura Piaveni, who became her fast friend.

In *Rhoda Fleming* we find herself, her fair sister, Dahlia, and Margaret Lovell, fairer, and famous by deserving her description, "milk and capsicums."

The *Adventures of Harry Richmond* offer the choice

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of several well-contrasted subjects ; but from this novel, as from *Beauchamp's Career*, I have limited myself to one, and chosen the little lady that exerted the greatest influence upon the hero—and not the one he married—the little princess Ottilia in one case, and Renée de Croisnel, the “smoky pearl,” in the other.

From *The Egoist*, I have taken Clara, all “sweet with the radiance of an English soft-breathing day,” and the romantic poetess, Lætitia Dale ; while to *Diana of the Crossways* we owe the famous heroine, a classical-goddess endowed with humour—whose words were so much wiser than her deeds—and dear Lady Dunstane, her devoted friend, and ideal protectress.

From *One of our Conquerors*, and from *Lord Ormont and his Aminta*, I have made but one portrait in each case,—i.e., Nesta Victoria, and Aminta ; and from the last of the novels, *The Amazing Marriage*, two, Carinthia Jane of remarkable parentage, and the beautiful Countess Livia, preferably of Baden-Baden.

Ladies I have left Unpainted.

BUT looking beyond these twenty, there are many other of his womenfolk whom, for various reasons, I have not painted ; and while with them it would be impossible “to gather up all the superficial indications which incite women to judge of character profoundly,”

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as it has been my aim to do in the several notes that accompany the twenty miniatures, it would be as disagreeable to me, as to these others it would be discourteous, to pass them by without a word. There is, however, no need to treat many of them in so cavalier a fashion ; and as it happens that one of the arts in which Meredith excelled was that of reducing a personality to a phrase, I shall take advantage of it where possible ; although owing to that art being, in its essence, akin to caricature, it lends itself more readily to the sketching of gnarled and lopped manhood than to the delineation of woman-in-the-blossom, where the variation from the common form is less, or, rather, is more subtle. "The sensation of power," wrote Ruskin, "is in proportion to the apparent inadequacy of the means to the end." Let us, then, regard our review of these ladies as an excursion into a portfolio of sketches in most of which we shall find the master-hand.

Giving precedence, then, I will not say to age, but rather to the prestige attaching to greater dimensions—for theirs is the most elaborate of these sketches—we will take first the Duvidney ladies, Dorothea and Virginia, the maiden aunts of Victor Radnor (in *One of our Conquerors*).

"They were . . . of the order of fragile minds which hold together by the cement of a mutual trepidation for the support of things established, and have it not in them to be able to recognise the unsanctioned."

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In these few words he takes them tenderly from their lavender, and stands them sedately before us ; or, speaking more precisely, it is *we* who remain standing before *their* sedateness. And here is another passage that throws more light upon them ; it is of the same colour, but of greater intensity :—

“They were thin-sweet old-fashioned grey gentlewomen, demurely conscious of their excellence and awake to the temptation in the consciousness, who imposed a certain reflex primness on the lips of the world when addressing them or when alluding to them. For their appearance was picturesque of the ancestral time, and their ideas and scrupulousness of delivery suggested the belated in ripeness ; orchard apples under a snowstorm ; or any image that will ceremoniously convey the mind’s profound appreciation together with the tooth’s panic dread of tartness. They were by no means tart ; only, as you know, the tooth is apprehensively nervous ; an uninviting sign will set it on edge. Even the pen which would sketch them has a spell on it and must don its coat of office, walk the liveried footman behind them.”

It seems to me impossible even to read the last few lines at any greater pace than that of the liveried footman stalking behind them !

For the relish of the contrast, let us place beside them the sketch of another lady of about the same age, Lady Charlotte Eglett, Lord Ormont’s sister (in

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Lord Ormont and his Aminta). Here we have, in hale old-age, a despotic but racy personality: often rude, but always intensely and glowingly alive. "I hate old age," said this grandmother of three lines of grandchildren; "they shan't dismount me till a blow comes."

Is not this true English oak?

With nothing more than a casual glance at Miss Vincent, Aminta's schoolmistress, who, meeting in the cricket tent little Emile from Paris, "took a slide on a few French phrases," we will pass on to *The Amazing Marriage*, and indulge ourselves with the contemplation of beauty in the person of Henrietta Fakenham, "golden Henrietta, the romantic Riette, banner of chivalry, reader of poetry."

We find her not only adorable to the eye, but adorably alive, and very human in her loveliness.

"She was beautiful, she was tempting, and probably the weakest of players in the ancient game of two," we read.

"She found it diverting to be admired . . . by many, while she knew herself to be absorbed in the possession of her by one. It bestowed the before and after of her marriage. She felt she was really, had rapidly become, the young woman of the world, armed with a husband, to take the flatteries of men for the needed diversion they brought."

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Leaving the professed beauty in the hothouse of her circle of admiration, we may now come to a little group of three girls from *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*. They are all fresh as summer morning, but each is intensely different from the others. The first is Peribanou, the child's charming name for a young English lady, met in Venice: I remember her only for the sake of her tenderness with the little boy; "She was like rest and dreams to me, soft sea and pearls." What a darling, to create this idea of herself in a child's mind!

Janet Ilchester was handsome, but hard. She excited admiration in the county; but for Harry Richmond she had, he tells us, "no softness; she could openly admire herself in my presence; she claimed possession of me openly, and at the same time openly provoked a siege from the remainder of my sex: she was not maidenly. She caught imagination by the sleeve, and shut it between square white-washed walls."

The third of this group, and the last I shall recall from *Harry Richmond*, though there are several others, is the gypsy girl, Kiomi—the sketch is made in sanguine. She was "the personification of wandering Asia. There was no question of beauty and grace, for these have laws. The curve of the brow broke like a beaten wave." She was "a fine doe-leopard."

To *Beauchamp's Career* are we indebted for Cecilia Halkett. Like the yacht in which she delighted, it is

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true she may have been "a refinement of beauty and of a beautiful servicelessness:" but listen to the enthusiasm the thought of her could call forth from a youthful admirer:—

"English style . . . wears best . . . it looks best. Foreign women—they're capital to flirt with. But a girl like Cecilia Halkett—one can't call her a girl, and it won't do to say Goddess, and queen and charmer are both out of the question, though she's both, and angel into the bargain. . . . I swear if I stood between a good and bad action, the thought of that girl would keep me straight, *and I've only danced with her once.*"

Of Chloe, (*The Tale of Chloe*) Mrs. Meynell has somewhere written that she was one of Meredith's "chosen ladies, very loving, much enduring, smiling for all wounds, gentle, decorous, distinguished;" and I take the liberty of drawing the mantle of her admirable description far enough to give its shelter also to Nataly (in *One of our Conquerors*) for whom I cherish an especial affection.

In *Sandra Belloni*, we are introduced to three sisters, the Misses Pole, but beyond a collective bow to them in deference to their reputation as experts in the theory and practice of "fine shades," we are bound to pass them in the crowd that peoples this novel and its sequel, *Vittoria*.

And now we cannot take anything more than a running glance, that merely suffices for us to recognise; Lady Blandish, of the silken manner, (in *The Ordeal of*

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Richard Feverel) whose taste for the Pilgrim's Scrip could not enable her gentleness to digest the entire system :

Clare Doria Forey, whose mother married her to her own old admirer, and whose diary is a tragedy of silence:

Lady Jocelyn (in *Evan Harrington*) that straight-speaking lady of gracious bearing:

Mrs. "Mel," that heavy and "unsympathetically impressive" person who sat down upon a picnic:

Mrs. Nargett Pagnell (*Lord Ormont and his Aminta*) the super-goose:

Clotilde (in *The Tragic Comedians*), "the Rhine grape with the elf in it, and the silver harp, and the stained legend"—if one may be permitted so to divert the application; Clotilde for whom "Rumour blew out a candle, and left the wick to smoke" her escapade:

Rosamund Culling, (*Beauchamp's Career*) whose ample bosom cherished for Nevil Beauchamp a sister's and a mother's love in one:

Jenny Denham, the sucking-social-reformer, and gallant little heart, who loved Nevil all the time and married him at the last:

Noorna-bin-Noorka (in *The Shaving of Shagpat*) who might have stepped straight out of The Arabian Nights; and Bhanavar-the-beautiful, whose beauty was her curse:

And we must not miss the inimitable Mrs. Berry,

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Richard Feverel's first nurse, whom Meredith describes in a word as "a bunch of black satin;" and whose practical advice to the bride, she pressed home with the admonition "Kissing don't last, cookery do:" nor, lastly, must we entirely overlook the poor woman whose nearest approach to wedded bliss was that she had once been "married to a pipe; and was the widow of Tobacco ash."

Friendship between his Women.

GEORGE MEREDITH has given us several notable examples of devoted friendship between women.

The most outstanding among them, and that which first recurs to one's mind is that of Diana Warwick and Lady Dunstane, a friendship tried in the furnace and proved true metal.

In that of Vittoria and Laura Piaveni we have an instance of a friendship that had its foundation in a common enthusiasm, strong enough to draw together two unequal personalities not likely otherwise to have been mutually attracted.

Not less unequal were Aminta, Countess of Ormont, and little Selina Collett who carried love letters for her at school and worshipped her for ever after.

Rhoda and Dahlia Fleming shew us a devotion between two sisters widely differing in temperament; it is not equally on each side a self-denying friendship,

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but it makes itself felt in ways as divergent as the characters of the two girls are different.

We hear not a great deal of the friendship between the Princess Ottilia and Janet Ilchester; but from Janet's thought of the Princess as "her first radiant perception of an ideal of her sex," no less than from the subsequent happenings under the guidance of Harry's "Providence," for so he called Ottilia, we need have little hesitation in filling in the vacant spaces.

The last that I can refer to is the friendship of Rebecca Wythan for the Carnithia that, once known, "filled her days." It is not one to be thought of lightly; but the memory is grateful for the picture of it that Meredith offers us, with Owain to complete "the chain of clasped hands."

Meredith's Literary Style.

O delight
And triumph of the poet, who would say
A man's mere 'yes,' a woman's common 'no,'
A little human hope of that or this,
And says the word so that it burns you through
With special revelation . . . a familiar thing
Become divine i' the utterance!

THESE lines, that recur to the memory from *Aurora Leigh*, are to me an admirable expression of what one understands by style. It remains, however, so far a matter of individual taste, that what

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appeals to one critic as a vivid style, seems to another to be nothing more than the merest negation of its possession. That which to you and me is a wild rose may well seem, to a blind man, only a prickly stalk.

It is interesting to read the following passage from a letter written by George Meredith for a work on *The Art of Authorship* (by George Bainton):—

“I have no style, though I suppose my work is distinctive. . . . I can say that I have never written without having clear in vision the thing put to paper: and yet this has been the cause of roughness and uncommonness in form of speech.”

There can be little doubt but that this “uncommonness in form of speech” is the stumbling block that has tripped scores of readers, to whom Meredith’s heroines are merely names, and the author himself nothing more than a book-shelf classic to be regarded from a respectful distance. To me it seems, that what he has done is to cast away not style, but the trammels of style, much as did the romantic poets “o’erperch the walls” that surrounded the classical school too closely for their would-be freer flight. It was freedom that Meredith sought, and he grasped it with no uncertain hand.

To me his style is that of a poet free as air. Difficult it occasionally may be; but difficult only from excess of meaning, never from confusion of thought, and always with a sense of the poetic values that is unerring. He

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can alternate a flight of harmonious fantasy with a dialogue-interchange of laconic thrust-and-parry, or with a hurling of volcanic expletives that gives us a whole scene in a flash. He can whisper silvery sentences that float and pass like airiest gossamer upon the zephyr, infinitely sensitive to the minutest gradation in distinctions; or, if he will, he can outstrip the hurricane, and with a noble sweep that rejects as mere dross and impediment all but the very core of the thought, bear us rhapsodically onward to a climax, to break off with a clash, or subside in a majestic flow of rhythmic and sonorous Saxon English.

In one of the early chapters of *Beauchamp's Career*, Meredith gives us the impression made upon the mind of a lady—Rosamund Culling—by her first attempt to read Carlyle's *Hero Worship*. The passage is one that I would fain quote, but must limit myself to recording her point of view: "To her the incomprehensible was the abominable."

George Meredith's style has undoubtedly been the cause of a great spilling of critical ink; but I have no intention of setting out to enumerate the legion of writers on the subject, preferring to include here, and in the several notes that follow, a few examples of the fine things that they have written, and to remain content to forget those of that species of writer that centres his attention so keenly upon his critical nostril, sniffing for

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defects, that he unconsciously closes his eyes and becomes blind to the beauties.

James Thomson was one of the first who wrote appreciative articles on the various novels at a time when they were little known and less valued.

Here is a fine passage :—

“The speeches do not follow one another mechanically adjusted like a smooth pavement for easy walking ; they leap and break, resilient and resurgent, like running foam-crested sea-waves, impelled and repelled and crossed by under-currents and great tides and broad breezes ; in their restless agitations you must divine the immense life abounding beneath and around and above them.”

This was written in 1876, in a critique on *Beauchamp's Career*, and is quoted by Mr. M. Buxton Forman in his *George Meredith: Some Early Appreciations*.

Let us now see what Oscar Wilde, that master of expression, has written of a style so dissimilar to his own.

“His style is chaos illumined by flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything except language ; as a novelist he can do everything except tell a story ; as an artist he is everything except articulate. Somebody in Shakespeare, Touchstone, I think, talks about a man who is always breaking his shins on his own wit, and it seems to me that this might serve as a basis for a criticism of Meredith's method. But whatever he is, he is not a realist, or rather I would say that he is a child of realism

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who is not on speaking terms with his father. By deliberate choice he has made himself a romanticist. He has refused to bow the knee to Baal, and . . . by means of his style he has planted round his garden a hedge full of thorns, and red with wonderful roses."

There is one other critic of this subject from whom I shall quote, for we owe to him, the French classicist, M. Charles Legras, a fine saying that occurs in his critical study of George Meredith. To sum him up in a simile, he writes, "He may be said to represent the Victory of Samothrace, that statue without a head, without feet, and in every sense incomplete, but of such magnificent parts that it seems still to tower above the greatest."

Reception of the Novels by the Public and the Critics.

The period that elapses between the publication of a book and its acknowledgment gives the measure of time by which an author is in advance of his age.

Schopenhauer.

No good thing of any sort shews its best face at first; nay, the commonest quality of a good work of art, if its excellences have any depth and compass, is that at first sight it occasions a certain disappointment.—*Carlyle.*

IT has become the fashion in some literary circles to say that George Meredith's works, so far from being neglected at the time of their publication, never lacked appreciation from the first. Such a statement is

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not without its modicum of truth, for from the publication of his first novels there was always a limited number of literary folk upon whose imagination his genius took an immediate and lasting hold. Nor among the experts were enthusiasts ever wanting to acclaim him; but this does not constitute, within the customary meaning of the word, the acceptance of a great writer.

Everybody knows that the progress of Meredith's works through the reading world has been slow; but they have steadily gained adherents and enthusiasts to follow a standard that was invariably carried high with the inspiration of a great ideal emblazoned upon it.

"Thank God," said Meredith, "I have never written to please the public."

Compare the rate of progress of his works with some of those by writers that the reading public has taken to its great heart, and the bird's-eye view is instructive.

The Ordeal of Richard Feverel was published in the same year as Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* and Thackeray's *Virginians*, and only four years later than *The Newcomes*.

Evan Harrington was published in the same year as George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

Sandra Belloni dates from 1864, and synchronizes with the publication of Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*.

The four most popular of Meredith's novels are

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The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, published in 1859, *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, published in 1871, *The Egoist*, dating from 1879, and *Diana of the Crossways* from 1885; while his last novel, *The Amazing Marriage*, was published in 1895.

Compare these dates with those of the several latter-day novelists who, if not necessarily born great, have at least had greatness thrust upon them, not alone by the expert opinion of the day, but also by the acclamation of the multitude.

Pleasant it is to read the generous and enthusiastic appreciation of many of his brother poets and novelists, but it is surely impossible, with the dates of their publication under our eyes, to imagine that George Meredith's novels have at the hands of the public received anything at all approaching the recognition and acceptance that is their due. Writing in the *Contemporary Review* in 1888, Sir J. M. Barrie neatly offered his explanation: "It is a law of the land that novels should be an easy gallop, but Mr. Meredith's readers have to pant uphill. He reaches his thoughts by ladders which he kicks away, letting his readers follow as best they can."

It is again his uncommonness in form of speech that is the stumbling block that suffices to trip and check the faint hearted, notwithstanding the brilliancy of his dialogue—and James Thomson held it to be "not only best of our age, but unsurpassed, if equalled, in our whole

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literature"—notwithstanding the truth and beauty of his people—people of flesh and blood at once “symbolic and interpretative”—and notwithstanding the magic of his scenes, “suggested in a few swift words instinct with spirit and luminous with beauty.”

It is instructive to find the French literary men, all stylists at heart, coming under the Meredith spell. In 1900, M. Charles Legras, the critic, came to the conclusion that at least fifteen days were necessary to a conscientious reading of *The Egoist*. If we place this considered opinion beside J. M. Barrie's hand-gallop, as the speed of the ordinary novel-reader, or beside Oscar Wilde's reference to the public's habit of swallowing their classics whole, but never tasting them, we may find perhaps a deeper reason for the comparative neglect of Meredith's “diamond-pointed prose,” as Coulson Kernahan called it.

M. Firmin Roz, in an essay on Meredith, has well said that “no novelist is more liable to be misjudged by reason of the very qualities which, when once duly appreciated, are inherent to his greatness.”

Meredith has sometimes been styled the Browning of our novelists; and the views of the two poets, their methods, and their reception by the reading public, ran upon lines sufficiently approximating to parallel to justify the phrase. I believe it to be James Thomson who first used it in his criticism of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*,

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but the late William Sharpe wrote of the two poets as the "only two writers of our age that have depicted women with that imaginative insight which is at once more comprehensive and more illuminative than women's own invision of themselves." Oscar Wilde also adopted it, but added a capricious twist that need disturb nobody: "Meredith," wrote he, "is a prose Browning—but so is Browning."

M. André Chevrillon brackets Meredith with Browning and Ruskin as being three great exemplars of English optimism; they were in love with life, they put their trust in Nature, they were themselves fulfilled with a great and over-powering love of our human nature.

In 1882, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote to W. E. Henley, "I see more and more that Meredith is built for immortality;" and if, after all, that be so, what matter a few years more or less?

Mrs. Browning has put the idea into notable lines:

What the poet writes,
He writes; mankind accepts it if it suits,
And that's success; if not the poem's passed
From hand to hand, and yet from hand to hand,
Until the unborn snatch it, crying out
In pity on their fathers' being so dull,
And that's success too.

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Envoy.

THERE is much that I have perforce left unwritten in this little introduction to a big subject ; but my position has not been without difficulty : for while any assumption of my reader's not being, perhaps, as well acquainted as I, with the heroines, would have been an impertinence ; to assume that he *is*, must of necessity appear an unpardonable affectation to the one who is *not*. The golden mean is so much easier to miss than to reach, that I can only hope for an occasional hit with the aid of my enthusiasm and of my affection for the dear people that I have painted, and about whom I am writing.

For all of us who count ourselves among their lovers—lovers, of a kind unique, that know not jealousy—no words are needed, for we have them already in our hearts, and the mere thought of them can carry us away to the land of the heart's desire, where people with souls “meet their fellows.” But for you who are still, to-day, only their friends—perhaps even the merest acquaintances—and have not yet climbed with them to their enchanted hilltop, to you I would say: Know them ; know them *well* ; and assuredly you will love them ; and no matter whether or no we see them with the same eyes—know them well *enough*, and they will come to you like delicious midsummer day-dreams, but not capriciously—only when you summon them. They

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will come with all the witchery of their persons, with all the glamour of their inimitable sayings, they will come at your call, "the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions."



Lucy

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Published in 1859

- i. LUCY
- ii. MRS. MOUNT

I.
LUCY

LUCY DESBOROUGH is first presented to us—
“with the roses of thirteen springs in her cheeks”—by her uncle, Farmer Blaize of Belthorpe, into whose care she had passed after the death of her father, a lieutenant in the Navy. It is nothing more than a glimpse of her that we are then permitted; and she seems no more than a shy little child.

A few years flit past—she has become a blossom, and some magic of the author wafts her straight into our hearts. And in an enchanting idyll, straight, also, goes she into the heart of the hero. Richard Feverel, for it is he, had met her once before; it was, in fact, when we ourselves first saw her, at her uncle’s farm. Richard, however, was sadly preoccupied on that occasion—being at the time on the worst possible terms with the farmer—and he noticed her even less than we did.

But now, in a delicious scene, very close to Nature, are they truly met!

Ferdinand and Miranda (for so Meredith fancifully terms them for the moment) have now arrived at the “magnetic age;” but we feel that between these two,

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there is something more deeply personal to them than the mere magnetism of youth, powerful though it be; and each of their two young hearts, recognising in the other its natural mate, cries out, "It is I, It is I."

The scene is described with the fine touch of the poet; "the sweet heaven-bird shivers out his song above them;" with exuberant youth in their hearts "they laugh and forget the cause of their laughter," and lest we too forget the cause of the enchantment of it all—for of course it is the radiance shed by the coming of love to these two—let us turn again and read a few lines:—

They stood near a stile, in sight of the foam of the weir and the many-coloured rings of eddies streaming forth from it. Richard's boat, meanwhile, had contrived to shoot the weir, and was swinging, bottom upward, broadside with the current down the rapid backwater.

"Will you let it go," said the damsel, eyeing it curiously.

"Yes," he replied, and low, as if he spoke in the core of his thought, "What do I care for it now!"

His old life was whirled away with it, dead, drowned. His new life was with her, alive, divine.

* * * * *

In truth, the coming of love is lightning swift.

It is interesting to note that although the author subjects her to none of his searching analyses, and refrains

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from exposing her heart to us under the microscope in the masterly but relentless fashion in which he deals with other folk in this book, we feel none the less that we know our Lucy, thoroughly ; we understand her, we love her ; with joy we share in her too-short-lived rapture, and our hearts go out to her in her trials—it is almost beyond endurance to see her sacrificed to the “System,” barred like the Peri, outside the gates of her Paradise.

Perhaps Meredith’s apparent reticence with the dissecting knife is accounted for by the comparative absence of complexity in Lucy’s character as against some of his later creations. She is by nature more direct, more simple—in so far as she can be simple, seeing that she is true to nature, completely feminine, and in love.

Modern she certainly is not ; and this has been charged against her in criticism as a fault, the precise complaint levelled against her being that she is “of the eternal old-fashioned ivy-type,” a definition intended, presumably, to be scarcely more than one degree in advance of the “veiled virginal doll”-heroine. Granting freely that Lucy is not a *modern*, one cannot on that account accept the implied corollary that she is lacking in force of character. Her very simplicity and directness make for character—for strength ; but they would almost appear to have deceived the critic above referred to, in the same way as, in the novel, they deceived old Mrs. Berry, who admitted to having mistaken Lucy “for one of the silly-softs :”

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she quickly discovered her error.

How the two young lovers ran away together, all may read who choose : and for my part I have nothing but envy for anyone who has yet to experience the first reading of "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel."

Let me quote a few passages from a love scene between Lucy and Richard, quaintly enough named "A diversion played on a penny whistle :"—

Pipe, happy sheep-boy, Love ! Irradiated angels, unfold your wings and lift your voices !

They have outflown philosophy. Their instinct has shot beyond the ken of science. They were made for their Eden.

"And this divine gift in store for me !"

So runs the eternal outcry of each, clasping each : it is their recurring refrain to the harmonies. How it illumined the years gone by and suffused the living Future !

Pipe, happy Love ! pipe on to these dear innocents !

The tide of colour has ebbed from the upper sky. In the West the sea of sunken fire draws back ; and the stars leap forth, and tremble, and retire before the advancing moon, who slips the silver train of cloud from her shoulders, and, with her foot upon the pine-tops, surveys heaven.

"Lucy, did you never dream of meeting me ?"

"O Richard ! yes ; for I remembered you."

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“Lucy! and did you pray that we might meet?”

“I did!”

Young as when she looked upon the lovers in Paradise, the fair Immortal journeys onward. Fronting her, it is not night, but veiled day. Full half the sky is flushed. Not darkness: not day; but the nuptials of the two.

“My own! my own for ever! You are pledged to me? Whisper!”

He hears the delicious music. . . .

A soft beam travels to the fern-covert under the pine-wood where they sit, and for answer he has her eyes: turned to him an instant, timidly fluttering over the depths of his, and then downcast; for through her eyes her soul is naked to him.

“Lucy! my bride! my life!”

The night-jar spins his dark monotony on the branch of the pine. The soft beam travels round them, and listens to their hearts. Their lips are locked.

Pipe no more, Love, for a time! Pipe as you will you cannot express their first kiss; nothing of its sweetness, and of the sacredness of it, nothing. . . . So Love is silent. . . . The woods are still. There is heard but the night-jar spinning on the pine-branch, circled by moonlight.



Mrs. Bella Mount

II.

MRS. MOUNT

MRS. MOUNT appears in but one chapter; it bears the title "An Enchantress." On two or three other occasions, it is true, we hear of her at a distance; but within the borders of her own chapter, she monopolizes our attention. She gives it its title, she gives it its substance: in it the hero becomes, for the moment, little more than the discouraged boy of one and twenty; "his great ambition must be covered by a house-top: he and the cat must warm themselves on the domestic hearth." It is indeed *her* chapter, *her* domain, and in it she reigns without a rival. One might almost imagine that having once set the period upon this lady's little hour upon the stage, our author softens to her, and seeks to make the *amende honorable* by surrendering the stage into her sole possession to win our sympathy if she can, with such masterly strokes does he proceed to bring before us her vivid personality.

We first hear of her when Richard is being detained in London by his scheming relations—anxious at any cost to keep him from Lucy. "The young man sought amusement. He allowed his aunt to drag him into

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society, and sick of that he made late evening calls on Mrs. Mount, oblivious of the purpose he had in visiting her at all. Her man-like conversation, which he took for honesty, was a refreshing change on fair lips. 'Call me Bella : and I'll call you Dick,' she said. And it came to be Bella and Dick between them."

This is how Meredith writes of the dangerous lady :—

"She could make you forget she was a woman, and then bring the fact startlingly home to you. She could read men with one quiver of her half-closed eyelashes. She could catch the coming mood in a man, and fit herself to it."

Later we are told that "sailing the pathways of the moon it was not celestial light that illumined her beauty."

In an appreciation of the "Millamant" of Congreve, Meredith writes in his *Essay on Comedy* :—"It is a piece of genius in a writer to make a woman's manner of speech portray her ;" and it is precisely this, that, in the highest spirit of comedy, Meredith proceeds to do for Mrs. Mount. The fair Bella spoke quite openly of herself. "I pretend to be no better than I am," she said, "and I know I'm no worse than many a woman who holds her head high." To back this she told him stories of blooming dames of good repute, and poured a little social sewerage into his ears She told him what she liked in him. "You're the only man I was ever alone with, who don't talk to me of love and make me feel sick."

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Her ways of wooing him have no place here ; but, though she relied upon no *kappore*, such as the Japanese dance to subdue the mere man, it is seen that her methods contain no less of fantasy and forethought : sufficient be it to say that despite the fact of his being “a hero and she a female will-o’-the-wisp,” the intimacy ripens apace. And as with Richard, so with us, for no sooner has it become “Bella” and “Dick” between them, than we are surprised at a survey to find ourselves also upon terms of easy familiarity with this dangerously vivid lady.

Her every sentence and her every action bring her vitally before us ; and the occasional word of the author, describing her person, either confirms our mental picture, or serves to steady the flight of too active an imagination.

We find that she had a dimple on her cheek ; her hair was black and her eyes brown. “They had a haughty sparkle when she pleased, and when she pleased a soft languor circled them. . . . She was best in her character of lovely rebel accusing foul injustice.” Is it possible to imagine a surer passport to Richard’s heart ?

A rumour of his having been seen going publicly about with her reaches the ears of his aunt ; but although he admits “the acquaintance of a lady very much misjudged and illused by the world” she can make but little of him.

The rumour came to Lady Blandish. She likewise lectured Richard, and with her he condescended to

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argue. But he found himself obliged to instance something he had quite neglected. "Instead of her doing me harm, it's I that will do her good."

Lady Blandish shook her head and held up her finger.

"This person must be very clever to have given you that delusion, dear."

"She *is* clever. And the world treats her shamefully."

"She complains of her position to you?"

"Not a word. But I will stand by her. She has no friend but me."

"My poor boy! Has she made you think that?"

"How unjust you all are!" cried Richard. . . .

He would pronounce no promise not to visit her, not to address her publicly. . . . "Because I am married, am I to give up the society of women?"

"Of women!"

"Isn't she a woman?"

"Too much so!" sighed the defender of her sex.

* * * * *

As we advance into the chapter, as we read on through the strangely compelling scene that is to be their farewell—the farewell of hero and will-o'-the-wisp—set before us, as it is, with a hundred magic touches of imagination, there seems to steal upon us and surround us, some strange exotic odour—not a fragrance certainly,

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but certainly not patchouli; perhaps it is the odour of “languid night-flowers.”

A touch of the wizard’s wand, and we see that under certain circumstances “a lurid splendour could glance about her, like lights from the pit.” Breathlessly we hurry on, noting the wiles of the enchantress—“no longer absolutely bent on winning him,” be it said—until suddenly it is all swept aside and the will-o’-the-wisp turns woman before our eyes.

EVAN HARRINGTON

Published in 1861

Appeared serially in 1860

iii. CAROLINE HARRINGTON

iv. LOUISA HARRINGTON

v. ROSE JOCELYN



Caroline

III.

CAROLINE HARRINGTON

CAROLINE was the eldest of the three handsome daughters of Melchisedec Harrington, tailor, of Lympport-on-Sea. He was commonly known as "the great Mel," and being a fellow of infinite jest, the best of good company, and of singularly handsome person, it became a custom with certain of the county folk to invite him to their houses.

This not unnaturally ended with his developing into an arrant snob : and we find him referred to as "a robust Brummel, and the Regent of low life."

Just before we open the book to begin the first chapter, the Great Mel dies ; but not before the three "daughters of the shears" have been safely married into spheres removed, in ascending degrees, from the sordid realm of tailordom, which their early training had taught them heartily to despise ; but which in their new walks of life, and especially in the altitudes that they set themselves to scale, was destined to follow them in their ascent like a spectre, hovering generally in the background, out of view of everybody except themselves, but apt at times to emerge and thrust itself inconveniently forward.

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Let me interpolate a short passage that shews us how, at the hospitable table of Lady Jocelyn, a certain Mr. George Uploft, a foxhunting squire, refers to the famous Harrington and his family—all unconscious the while, that by dwelling upon the interesting subject, one of the few on which he is well posted, he is compelling poor Caroline and her youngest sister to the ghastly task of “digesting their father at dinner.”

“Old Mel,” said he, “looked over his daughters like a turkey-cock. Nobody good enough for them. Whacking handsome gals—three! Used to be called the ‘Three Graces of Lymport.’ . . . The eldest, I can tell you . . . she was a spanker! She was the handsomest gal, I think, I ever saw. For the mother’s a fine woman, and what with the mother, and what with old Mel—”

“We won’t enter into the mysteries of origin,” quoth Lady Jocelyn.

* * * * *

Caroline, with her “dewy blue eyes,” was the first to marry; but her husband scarcely proved a success. He was of an exceedingly jealous temper, and obsessed with an overwhelming sense of the obligation under which he had placed the handsome girl by marrying her, and of his magnanimity in stooping for that purpose from the lofty elevation of his position of subaltern in the Marines; in short, “if we may be permitted to suppose the Colonel of a regiment on friendly terms with one of

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his corporals, we have an estimate of the domestic life of Major and Mrs. Strike."

In order due, the second daughter is wedded, from the house of Mrs. Strike, to an opulent brewer, before whom all reference to "tailordom" is rigidly excluded, and in whose presence the bride's parents are euphemistically referred to as "the country couple."

With the advantage of starting from a higher level, "it was natural that the remaining sister should take a bolder flight. Of the fair Louisa and the foreign Count, and how she first encountered him in the brewer's saloons, and how she, being a humorous person, laughed at his 'loaf' for her, and wore the colours that pleased him, and kindled and soothed his jealousy, little is known beyond the fact that she espoused the Count, under the auspices of the affluent brewer, and engaged that her children should be brought up in the faith of the catholic church."

The Count might have spared himself the precaution, as she never—but that has nothing to do with Caroline, to whom we must return.

Despite a certain unhappy taint which, in the surrounding atmosphere of watchful disingenuousness, it was perhaps impossible that she should escape, Caroline was a good girl. Led and pushed by her amazing sister, the Countess, in whose enterprising hands she was little more than a lay figure, for use only in such manner

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and on such occasions as the Countess considered expedient for their false position, poor Caroline eventually found herself in a veritable quagmire of intrigue.

Though attractive to the opposite sex, she is little given to talking—least of all, of herself—and we have therefore to cull a passage from a letter written by the Countess to the second sister, Mrs. Andrew Cogglesby, to enlighten us as to the progress of the campaign at Beckley Court, and if it happens that it unwittingly sheds a side-light upon its writer, so much the better.

“There are fairies, I think, where there are Dukes! Where could it have come from? Could any human being have sent messengers post to London, ordered, and had it dispatched here within this short time? You shall not be mystified! I do not think I even *hinted*, but the afternoon walk I had with his Grace, on the first day of his arrival, I did *shadow* it very delicately how much it was to be feared our poor Carry could not, that she dared not, betray her liege lord in an evening dress. Nothing more, *upon my veracity!* And Carry has this moment received the most beautiful green box, containing two of the most heavenly *old* lace shawls you ever beheld. We divine it is to hide poor Carry’s matrimonial blue mark! We *know* nothing. Will you imagine Carry is for not accepting it! Priority of birth does not imply superior wits, dear—no allusion to *you*.”

We look on amazed at the cynical acquiescence of

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the Countess as her unhappy sister is tempted by her ducal admirer, and the offer of his protection pressed upon her ; but it is not until, under the same perilous leadership, poor Caroline has approached desperately near to the brink, that a hand is stretched to her, all unexpectedly, to prevent her taking the mad plunge into the abyss.

IV.

LOUISA HARRINGTON

LOUISA HARRINGTON, who became the Countess de Saldar de Sancorvo (never forget the *de*, she wrote to her sisters) was the youngest of "the three graces of Lymport," a little of whose family history has been sketched in the foregoing note upon her sister Caroline.

As a girl, we learn, from a man who had then been in love with her, "she was a tartar," and although at that time she was no concern of ours, it is illuminating to find that after the lapse of half a dozen years he is not ashamed to confess to being still afraid of her. "She's more than any man's match," said he.

After living for a few years in Portugal with her husband (a diminutive tawny man) she sailed for England with, perhaps, a little olive added to her complexion, something of the flowery courtesy and the languorous affectations of the Portuguese as they appeared to her, and a more extensive and varied cargo of super-humbug than one is likely ever again to encounter.

No doubt it was in Lisbon that she learned that feminine modesty was most suitably "protected by the

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use of the fan ;” for her, “idlesse was fashionable ; exquisite languors were a sign of breeding ;” but, beneath the veneer, behind her “airy sorrows, gauzy griefs,” she was a schemer to mean ends by mean methods.

We are permitted to read the following extract from a letter that she addressed to her sister in London soon after arriving at Beckley Court, on a visit for which she has “manœuvred” an invitation ; and we may take it as a fair example of her florid style, and of her views upon England after her experience of Portugal—for her pose, after her return, is to exhibit her Portuguese manner, even to the length of adopting a slight foreign accent :

“None of your men treat a woman *as a woman*. We are either angels, or good fellows, or heaven knows what that is bad. No exquisite delicacy, no insinuating softness, mixed with respect, none of that *hovering over the border*, as Papa used to say, none of that happy indefiniteness of manner which seems to declare ‘I would love you if I might,’ or ‘I do, but dare not tell,’ even when engaged in the most trivial attentions—handing a footstool, remarking on the soup, etc. You none of you know how to *meet* a woman’s smile, or to engage her eyes without boldness—to *slide off them*, as it were, gracefully.”

Here are a few lines from another of her letters to the same sister, the wife of the brewer, shewing the progress of her campaign at Beckley Court :



Louisa (The Countess de Saldar)

EVAN HARRINGTON

“I need not say I have my circle. . . . My maxim in any house is—never to despise the good opinion of the *nonentities*. They are the majority. I think they all look up to me. But then of course you must fix that by seducing the *stars*. One praises my abilities, one my style, the rest follow, and I do not withhold my smiles, and they are happy, and I should be but that . . . I sacrificed my peace in binding myself to a dreadful sort of *half-story*. I know I did not quite say it.”—She has claimed relation to a certain baronet of the same name, the news of whose death has given her the bright idea of stealing a little reflected light from his coronet—“It seems as if Sir A.’s ghost were going to haunt me. And then I have the most *dreadful* fears that what I have done has disturbed him in the other world. Can it be so? It is not *money* or *estates* we took at all, dearest!”

No; it was only that she had allowed her tricky tongue to run away with her, and found later that she had involved herself in a singularly awkward position, necessitating further lies and, worse than that, involving her in the possibility of being found out!

We must not overlook the fact of her being a most plausible person, excepting at the moments when she was ruffled—the Countess did not ruffle well: was, in fact, apt then to show her claws.

She had the power of attracting men: indeed of most of them she could make mere pawns in her game; but

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to women she was something of an unsatisfactory enigma ; and she knew it. "Ah, my dear," she writes to her confidante, her sister, "if we had none but men to contend against, and only women for our tools!"

With her preposterous affectations, with her "in veritys" and "on my veracitys," with her nimble and stinging tongue and her quite infamous diplomacy, with her cloak of religious cant at hand to throw over her treachery, it is not easy to find the precise word for her without drawing the obvious one from the infernal regions for the purpose. But there is one crown, however, to which she is undoubtedly entitled—and as she will assuredly wear it with an air, we may safely leave her to crown herself—Queen of Humbugs.

V.

ROSE JOCELYN

ROSE was the daughter of Sir Franks Jocelyn, Bart., of Beckley Court, and being the only daughter, ran the chance, usual in such circumstances, of being what is called "spoiled."

Children whom it is really possible to "spoil" by lavishing love and affection upon them, are only those that lack the strength of character to bear being made happy—in short, weaklings.

Rose Jocelyn was no weakling.

On the contrary, she is one of Meredith's types of stedfastness. As a young girl she might perhaps be accused of waywardness—but of what account is waywardness in a girl of sixteen.

"Do you know," she said to Evan Harrington, "they think me cold and heartless—Am I?"

Whatever *they* may have thought about it, those who know her know better. Have we not seen her valiant little heart goaded this way and that, harassed and tormented? And have we not watched it come again to its allegiance, as unfailingly as the magnetic needle to its north?

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Here are a few passages from a love-scene between Rose and Evan, following upon a misunderstanding :

“Rose saw him approach, and knew him in the distance. She was sitting on a lower branch of the aspen, that shot out almost from the root, and stretched over the intervolving rays of light on the tremulous water. She could not move to meet him. She was not the Rose whom we have hitherto known. Love may spring in the bosom of a young girl, like Hesper in the evening sky, a grey speck in a field of grey, and not be seen or known, till surely as the circle advances, the faint planet gathers fire, and, coming nearer earth, dilates, and will and must be seen and known. . . . She was the first to find her wits; but not before she spoke did she feel, and start to feel, how long had been the silence, and that her hand was still in his. . . .—Love is blindest just when the bandage is being removed from his forehead—. . . . And now, as if by revelation, he saw that large sole star in the bosom of his darling, and was blinded by it and lose his senses.

‘Rose, beloved, I love you.’

Her hand, her arm, her waist, he seized bending over her. And, like the flower of his nightly phantasy bending over the stream, he looked and saw in her sweet face the living wonders that encircled his image; she murmuring, ‘No, no, you must hate me. I know it.’

Anything but a denial, and he might have retrieved



Rose Jocelyn

EVAN HARRINGTON

his step; but that she should doubt his strong true love, plunged him deeper.

‘I love you, Rose. I have not a hope to win you; but I love you. My heaven! My own darling! I hold you a moment—and I go; but know that I love you and would die for you. Beloved Rose! Do you forgive me?’

She raised her face to him.

‘Forgive you for loving me?’ she said, smiling the soft inward smile of rarest bliss.

Holy to them grew the stillness; the ripple suffused in golden moonlight; the dark edges of the leaves against superlative brightness. Not a chirp was heard, nor anything save the cool and endless carol of the happy waters, whose voices are the spirits of silence. Nature seemed consenting that their hands should be joined, their eyes intermingling. And when Evan, with a lover’s craving, wished her lips to say what her eyes said so well, Rose drew his fingers up, and, with an arch smile and a blush, kissed them.

* * * * *

The passing of the minutes locked them closer; each had a new link—in a word, or a speechless breath, or a touch; and to break the marriage of their eyes there must be infinite baseness on one side, or on the other disloyalty to love.

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The moon was a silver ball, high up through the aspen-leaves. Evan kissed the hand of Rose, and led her back to the house. He had appeased his conscience by restraining his wild desire to kiss her lips.

In the hall they parted. Rose whispered, 'Till death!' giving him her hands."

SANDRA BELLONI

Published in 1864 under the title of "Emilia in England."



Sandra Belloni

SANDRA BELLONI

VI.
SANDRA BELLONI

SANDRA BELLONI, or, to give her her full names, Emilia Alessandra, is perhaps the most elaborate study that Meredith ever made.

In the course of a critical article written in the year of the novel's publication, we find Mr. Justin McCarthy recording his opinion that : "Emilia is a character wholly new in literature, and painted with consummate skill." That it necessarily goes deeper into the heart of the subject by reason of its phenomenal high-polish, or that it thereby creates in us more affection, is an opinion to which I am scarcely prepared to subscribe.

The manner of our meeting Sandra is highly original. Let me quote it, prefacing the passage with the reminder that a mysterious voice has been heard, singing in the woods at night, and that an expedition has promptly started out to satisfy the natural curiosity of certain young men and maidens. The search party reaches the spot, more or less together ; but listen :—

"And sure enough that was the voice of the woods, cleaving the night air, not distant. A sleepy fire of early moonlight hung through the dusky fir-branches. The

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voice had the woods to itself, and seemed to fill them, and soar over them, it was so full and rich, so light and sweet. . . . Tell me, what opens heaven more flamingly to heart and mind, than the voice of a woman, pouring clear accordant notes to the blue night sky, that grows light blue to the moon? . . . There was no flourish in her singing. . . . She seemed to have caught the ear of Night, and sang confident of her charm. . . . In the middle of the wood there was a sandy mound, rising half the height of the lesser firs, bounded by a green-grown vallum . . . Lank dry weeds and nettles, and great lumps of green and grey moss, now stood (there), . . . and the moon, slanting through the fir-clumps, was scattered on the blossoms of twisted orchard-trees, gone wild again. Amid this desolation, a dwarfed pine, whose roots were partially bared as they grasped the broken bank that was its perch, threw far out a cedar-like hand. In the shadow of it sat the fair singer."

Through two novels, *Sandra Belloni* and its sequel, *Vittoria*, Emilia is developed and expounded; and profound have been the differences in the critical estimates of the art value of the two books. On the question of the presentation of the character of the heroine, however, there is, generally speaking, a consensus of praise. In his admirable volume *George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism*, Mr. J. A. Hammerton has summed up the matter when he writes that "The novelist has made one

SANDRA BELLONI

of his supremest efforts in the character of Sandra, but all else has been subordinated to that."

Mr. Arthur Symons holds Emilia to be Meredith's greatest creation. He writes : "She does not comprehend evil, but instinctively abhors it. Without superficial cleverness, she penetrates to essentials. She has something of the primal gratitude and devotion of an animal."

Mr. Justin McCarthy wrote thus :—"Emilia's own character is the life and beauty of the story. She is genius without culture ; goodness without rule ; love without worldly restraint. . . . I remember no character in modern literature that so faithfully pictures the nature which is filled with a genius for music . . . Intellect, and strangely enough the more poetic phase of intellect, seems often wanting in the singer whose whole soul is filled with music. . . . In everything, save that which regards song alone, her intellectual nature is commonplace and prosaic."

Naturally everyone may not agree with this dictum ; but to those that do, I would recommend the exercise of our artistic prerogative of selection, and choosing for ourselves that part of her that is all song and inspiration, think of her singing : either singing alone in the moonlit woods where we first found her ; or, if you prefer it, let us think of her in her greatest moment, chanting her inspired song of Freedom, in the presence of the enemies of Italy, robed like a noble damsel in amber and blue

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silk, such an one “as the great Venetian might have sketched from his windows on a day when the Doge went forth to wed the Adriatic.”

RHODA FLEMING

Published in 1865

vii. RHODA

viii. DAHLIA

ix. MARGARET LOVELL

VII.

RHODA

RHODA FLEMING was the younger of the two daughters of a yeoman farmer of Wrexby in Kent. "In stature, in bearing, and in expression they were strikingly above their class. They carried erect shoulders, like creatures not ashamed of showing a merely animal pride, which is never quite apart from the pride of developed beauty. They were as upright as Oriental girls, whose heads are nobly poised from carrying the pitcher to the well."

Dahlia, the elder, was the village beauty, fair, and the cherished flower of the family; while Rhoda was the "darkie lass," with harder outlines, and compelled by circumstances to start life as the family drudge—a somewhat sullen Cinderella—"Too much of a thinker, I reckon," said the farmer. "She's idle, but I believe the flesh on her bones she'd wear away for anyone that touched her heart. She's a temper."

Not a very comfortable home-companion, one might imagine; yet with old uncle Anthony she was the favourite; and he had tried both: "There," cried he, "you never get a compliment out of that girl. She

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gives you the nut, and you've got to crack it, and there may be, or there mayn't be a kernel inside—*she* doesn't care."

The two sisters are devotedly attached, and when Dahlia drifts up to the mysterious metropolis, it is their first separation.

In a critical article by W. E. Henley, we find the subject of the novel finely spoken of as "a tremendous spiritual tragedy." So be it. The end of its first act is Dahlia's flight to London.

This is how Rhoda can talk of her sister when the half-sheltering cloak of uncertainty can no longer be held before her: "We are one, and will be till we die. I feel her hand in mine though she's away and lost. She's my darling for ever and ever. We're one!"

She is addressing the man who is on fire for love of her; but they are at cross-purposes, and a thoughtless word that he drops about Dahlia in London leads Rhoda to goad him too far. He breaks out:—

"By heaven! the task of taming you—that's the blessing I'd beg for in my prayers! Though you were as wild as a cat of the woods, by heaven! . . . You're the beauty to my taste, and devil is what I want in a woman! I can make something out of a girl with a temper like yours."

This man, Robert, with his passionate outbursts, is in some respects not unlike Rhoda; and recognising in



Rhoda

RHODA FLEMING

her his fellow, this is how he describes her: "Mother, just listen: she's as dark as a gypsy. She's the faith-fullest, stoutest hearted creature in the world. She has large brown eyes; see her once! She's my mate! . . . Never mind whether she's handsome or not. She isn't a lady; but she's my lady; she's the woman I could be proud of. She sends me to the devil!"

The character of the untamed Rhoda is a great study touched in with unerring skill: a vivid creature, with her swarthy colouring and phenomenal powers of endurance; with her unswerving loyalty and her fury of protecting love for her much-wronged sister, with her face of fire when she was roused, and her earnest gravity in repose.

There is in Rhoda's character a tragic remorselessness that carries one back to the Old Testament for its prototype; and we are not surprised at finding Robert, in one of the later scenes reflecting on her as "a strange Biblical girl, with Hebrew hardness of resolution, and Hebrew exaltation of soul."

VIII.

DAHLIA

DAHLIA FLEMING was the spoiled darling of the farmer's family ; she was devoted to her sister, and not inappreciative of Rhoda's admiration. The two girls "tossed one another their mutual compliments, drawn from the chief book of their reading. Queen of Sheba was Dahlia's title : " Rachel was Rhoda's.

People in story-books, however, exercised their accustomed fascination over them, especially those, we are told, "of the courtly French fairy-books, wherein the princes talk in periods as sweetly rounded as are their silken calves ; nothing less than angelically, so as to be a model to ordinary men." Scarcely surprising is it, accordingly, to read : "The idea of love upon the lips of ordinary men provoked Dahlia's irony ; and the youths of Wrexby and Fenhurst had no chance against her secret Prince Florizels. Them she endowed with no pastoral qualities ; on the contrary, she conceived that such pure young gentlemen were only to be seen, and perhaps met, in the great and mystic City of London."

Her imagination, poor darling, was evidently capable of a fairly wide flight !

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Dahlia was a delightful girl; and if handicapped, perhaps, with a degree or so more than her fair share of vanity—well, an additional degree needs little extenuation in one so flowerlike and ingenuous.

Her uncle Tony was probably less her admirer than anyone whom she had met in the narrow village circle. He never appreciated her; and if she scandalised his antiquated sense of the proprieties, her father's half-hearted apology did her no more than justice.

"It's flightiness; that's all. You mustn't think ill of poor Dahly. She always was the pretty one, and when they know it, they act up to it; she was her mother's favourite:" she was also his own, but he forgot to add it. Had he been less keenly disappointed at the impression she had made upon her uncle—of whose testamentary generosity he was deluding himself with the wildest hopes—we should have expected of him a little more grit in her defence, for he was not ungenerous.

It is as impossible as it would be indiscreet to attempt to follow Dahlia's comings and goings on her visit to the great metropolis; but we may at least permit ourselves a peep into some chambers occupied by Mr. Edward Blancove—nephew of Squire Blancove of Wrexby Hall—where we may hope (or fear) to catch an echo of her. A cursory inspection of the young man's gallery-of-beauty reveals her to us in somewhat singular juxtaposition not without its significance. One may preface the quotation



Dahlia

RHODA FLEMING

with the remark that we are destined to hear a great deal of the lady whose name heads the following paragraph :—

“Mrs. Margaret Lovell’s portrait hung in Edward’s room. It was a photograph exquisitely coloured, and was on the left of a dark Judith, dark with a serenity of sternness. On the right hung another coloured photograph of a young lady, also fair ; and it was a point of taste to choose between them. Do you like the hollowed lily’s cheeks, or the plump rose’s ? Do you like a thinnish fall of golden hair, or an abundant cluster of nut-brown ? Do you like your blonde with limpid blue eyes, or prefer an endowment of sunny hazel ? Finally, are you taken by an air of artistic innocence winding serpentine about your heart’s fibres ; or is blushing simplicity sweeter to you ? Mrs. Lovell’s eyebrows were the faintly-marked trace of a perfect arch. The other young person’s were thickish, more level ; a full brown colour. She looked as if she had not yet attained to any sense of her being a professed beauty ; but the fair widow was clearly bent upon winning you, and had a shy playful intentness of aspect. Her pure white skin was flat on the bone ; the lips came forward in a soft curve, and if they were not artistically stained, were triumphantly fresh. Here, in any case, she beat her rival, whose mouth had the plebian beauty’s fault of being too straight in a line, and was not trained, apparently, to tricks of dainty pouting.”

It is not long before we come upon a series of

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letters—some given at full length, others merely indicated—that propel us round the compass of our hopes and fears, pointing us now this way and now that, until we come to a full stop at the fated spot opposite the meridian. We had a prevision that we were tending to it even when she wrote “I am too happy, I am too happy :” just as the dread of evil news of Dahlia was a nightmare common to each of the silent circle at the farm.

Her first touching letter to Edward Blancove is followed by a series to Rhoda, culminating in an ecstasy proclaiming her marriage, and announcing her departure for the continent—with her husband, whose name, however, she does not divulge. There is also for her father a short note that throws him into a fury.

To these succeed letters from Lausanne, and Como, —“tell father that gentlemen in my Edward’s position cannot always immediately proclaim their marriage to the world. There are reasons,”—then Venice, and so “onward from city to city, like a radiation of light from the old farm-house, where so little of it was . . . and then, without warning, with only a word to say that she neared Rome, the letters ceased—

A chord snapped in Rhoda’s bosom.”

* * * * *

There is a short passage that I cannot refrain from quoting from one of Dahlia’s letters written from Venice,

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when in the midst of her happiness, she looks back, perhaps half fearful of the future, to her home life at the farm :—

“You used to spoil me at home—you and that wicked old Mother Dumpling, and our own dear mother, Rhoda—oh! mother, mother! I wish I had always thought of you looking down on me! You made me so vain—much more vain than I let you see I was. There were times when it is quite true I thought myself a princess.”



Margaret Lovell

IX.

MARGARET LOVELL

MARGARET LOVELL (whose portrait we have already seen, hanging in rooms of her cousin, Edward Blancove) was an extremely young widow, perilously fascinating. At seventeen she went to India with her husband—"but what fatal breath was it coming from Mrs. Lovell that was always inflaming men to mutual animosity?"—He fought there two duels "for the vindication of his young and terrible wife," and lost his life in a third, in an encounter with a Sikh Sirdar. A week later she received a proposal of marriage from his colonel! But it suited her better to return to England, where she amused herself by playing hostess for her two uncles, Lord Elling and Squire Blancove. It was a saying of hers that she "left India to save her complexion," and this concealed a deeper truth than one might have expected of so apparently trivial a remark. Be that as it may, "Mrs. Lovell's complexion was worth saving from the ravages of the Indian climate, and the persecution of claimants to her hand. She was golden and white, like an Autumnal birch-tree—yellow hair, with warm-toned streaks in it, shading a fabulously fair

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skin. Then too, she was tall, of a nervous build, supple and proud in motion, a brilliant horse-woman, and a most distinguished sitter in an easy drawing-room chair, which is . . . no mean quality."

Here is a picturesque paragraph:—

"She had a name in the world. There is a fate attached to some women, from Helen of Troy downward, that blood is to be shed for them. One duel on behalf of a woman is a reputation to her for life; two are notoriety. If she is very young, can they be attributable to her? We charge them naturally to her overpowering beauty. It happened that Mrs. Lovell was beautiful. Under the light of the two duels, her beauty shone as from an illumination of black flame. Boys adored Mrs. Lovell. These are moths. But more, the birds of air, nay, grave owls (who stand in this metaphor for whiskered experience) thronged, dashing at the apparition of terrible splendour. Was it her fault that she had a name in the world?"

Later on we learn that she had "mastered the secret of keeping the young men respectfully enthusiastic; so that their irrepressible praises did not drag her down to their level; and the female world, with which she was perfectly feminine . . . and as silkenly insipid every evening of her life as was needed to restore her reputation, admitted that she belonged to it, which is everything to an adventurous spirit of that sex—indeed, the sole secure

RHODA FLEMING

basis of operations.”

It is not unworthy of note that while Meredith lavishes verbal gems of description upon this dangerous lady, and while she strikes sparks from the wits of more than one young man in his attempt to read the enigma she offers them, we never really know her: there always remains some veil behind which we cannot see, and despite his apparent frankness of disclosure, something curiously secret. Here is her method with her men-friends as she expounds it:—

“My friends are my friends because they are not allowed to dream they will do anything else. If they are taken poorly, I commend them to a sea-voyage. . . . They return friendly as before, that is, they generally do.”

Let us now take a few phrases, more or less illuminating either of herself, or of the effect that she produced upon her two cousins, each her admirer in his individual way.

Thus her heavy cousin, Algernon Blancove: “She never lets me feel a fool with her; and she has a way, by Jove, of looking at me, and letting me know she’s up to my thoughts, and isn’t angry.”

“Milk and capsicums,” quoth Edward on one occasion. On another he tells Algernon, who is shewing signs of getting singed, “She’s handsome, she’s dashing, and as near being a devil as any woman I ever met.”

In a subsequent talk between them, Algernon—in a

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momentary delusion of unselfishness, fearing it impossible that he can ever succeed with the fair widow, and anxious she should not drift out of the family—thrusts her upon Edward, continuing:—

“And you’ll go into Parliament, and give dinners, and a woman like Peggy Lovell ’d intrigue for you like the deuce.”

“A great deal too like”—Edward muttered.

* * * * *

But free of her, as this clever young man doubtless thought himself when paying his double-edged compliments, it is not long ere we find him also affected; this time it is with “a throb of desire to gain possession of her and crush her.” He therefore sets himself the task of subduing her. “His own subjection,” we read, “was the first fruit of his effort.”

It must not be imagined that Margaret Lovell’s influence was for evil and for evil only. On the contrary she could be gracious, she could awaken the sleeping chivalry in a man, and for a coward she had nothing but contempt. “Everything she said and did held men in the scales, and approved or rejected them;” but Meredith is probably most characteristic and radical when he sums up Margaret Lovell as a crucible woman, “a woman fashioned to do both harm and good, and more of harm than good. . . a woman in contact with whom you were soon resolved to your component elements.”

VITTORIA

Published in 1867

Appeared serially in 1866

X.

LAURA PIAVENI

LAURA PIAVENI was a daughter of Count Serabiglione, a noble of Lombardy, who, despite his instincts of a parasite upon the Court of Austria, could still, in the presence of a sympathetic audience, display enough pride of race to maintain that the fervent blood of the Italian people could "outlive ten races of conquerors."

His tendency towards facing-both-ways betrayed itself even in the marriage of his daughters. One he gave to an Austrian nobleman in the Imperial diplomatic service; and the other, Laura, wedded the Italian patriot, Giacomo Piaveni, betrayed to the Austrians and shot on Annunciation Day. His compatriots looked askance at his daughter's marriage to a hated Austrian, and the Count subsequently "mixed little with his countrymen—the statement might be inversed."

Laura Piaveni is a tragic figure, the dominant motive of whose life was a fiery patriotism maintained at white heat by the ever-present memory of her husband's death—murder, it was, to her.

"The Signora Piaveni made no concealment of her

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abhorrence of the House of Austria, and hatred of Austrian rule in Italy. The spirit of her dead husband came to her from the grave, and warmed the frame previously indifferent to anything save his personal merits."

Against a background that shows us Milan and Lombardy in revolt—for the story carries us up to 1858, and unfolds before us, now with a wealth of vivid detail, and again merely touched in with a suggestion, a panorama of the condition of Italy and the Italians in the last years of the Austrian rule—Laura Piaveni stands out clearly before us. She is always the great lady. Whether it be as the goad for the flagging energies of the half-hearted, or as the unfailing friend to those who were giving themselves in the great cause, or whether as the vessel of scorn for those who could hold aloof, she is always the great lady who has suffered and who knows how to endure suffering.

Living in an atmosphere of spying and counter-spying, she is never smirched by it; and if, as we read, "the savage soul of the woman was robbed of its share of tragic emotion by having to hold so far aloof," she is not the first woman to chafe against the trammels of womanhood holding her passive, when all about her men are rushing to the attack.

"I think," she once said, "that women are those persons who have done evil in another world."



Laura Piaveni

VITTORIA

Her friendship with Vittoria is one of the beautiful things in the book ; and Vittoria's gradual change of attitude towards the great lady—from shy worship to whole-hearted frank devotion—is wonderfully portrayed. “She loved her friend's worn eyelids and softly shut mouth ; the after-glow of battle seemed on them ; and the patient turning of Laura's eyes this way and that to speakers upon common things, covered the despair of her heart as with a soldier's cloak.”

THE ADVENTURES OF HARRY RICHMOND

Published in 1871

Appeared serially in 1870

XI.

THE LITTLE PRINCESS OTTILIA

THE LITTLE PRINCESS OTTILIA, or, to give her all her names, Ottilia Frederica Wilhelmina Hedwig, was the only daughter of the ruling Prince Ernest of Eppenwelzen-Sarkeld. She has been picturesquely described by an able critic as “an Undine piquant with worldly wit,” a phrase sufficiently promising to whet one’s curiosity as to the personality inspiring it.

Accepting then, at the outset, this view of her, one might be pardoned an expression of surprise at finding her referred to, by a distinguished American critic (Mr. G. Parsons Lathrop), as “that woman of ideal grandeur and sweetness.” The difference appears too extreme; at first glance, indeed, irreconcilable. Yet the explanation is a simple one: the first critic referring to her as a child (for we meet her at the tender age of thirteen), while the second is recording the impression that the princess finally leaves with him at the conclusion of the story, by which time she has arrived at womanhood—not, be it added, without her emotional adventures, despite the iron bulwark of court etiquette with which she is surrounded.

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It is interesting to ascertain to what extent the critic first referred to (unfortunately an anonymous writer) modifies his view of her as she develops—for it is not that she changes, she develops. Here is a suggestive passage from the same article: "Otilia was one of those women whom men love passionately and know very little about. Once in a life a man may see such a face—in lonely glimpses; hear such a voice—a music broken by long pauses of absence. She creates a tropical storm in his imagination; he gives her his dreams, thinks he must die for want of her—and lives to take to wife" an utterly different kind of woman.

Meredith refers to her at one time as being "endowed by nature and position to do the work of an angel;" but real as she undoubtedly is at this or any other period, I confess that for me she lives more vividly as the *little* princess—wayward but winsome, regarding us "with an absorbed comprehensive air, quite unlike the manner of a child;" so quickly developing into the unfettered young girl, affectionate, staunch, but always deliciously imperious.

Harry Richmond tells us, "She could pursue her studies, and argue and discuss and quote, keep unclouded eyes, and laugh and play, and be her whole living self, unfettered, as if the pressure of my hand implied nothing."

Now let us turn back to the paragraph in which Meredith gives us our introduction to her. It happens

THE ADVENTURES OF HARRY RICHMOND

thus in a wood through which Harry and his boy friend, Temple, are tramping. Harry relates it thus :—

“A little lady on a pony, attended by a tawny-faced great square-shouldered groom on a tall horse, rode past, drew up on one side, and awaited our coming. She was dressed in a grey riding-habit and a warm winter jacket of gleaming grey fur, a soft white boa loose round her neck, crossed at her waist, white gauntlets, and a pretty black felt hat with flowing rim and plume. There she passed us under review . . . with arm bowed at her side, whip and reins in one hand . . . rocks and trees, high silver firs rising behind her. . . . She waited for us to march by, without attempting to conceal that we were the objects of her inspection.”

Delightful, young, unaffected, as is Meredith's presentation of his little Princess, under all manner of exceptional circumstances, it never escapes us that it is the daughter—an erratic and capricious little daughter if you will—of a reigning house that we see, and to whom we listen. Yet how deliciously, upon occasion, she trips down the steps of the throne, a princess “free as air.”

Let me conclude by quoting a short love scene, perhaps as unique in its setting as it is fanciful in its matter: premising only that it all takes place in a thunder-storm, beside a river that flows through the Sarkeld forest, and that it is Harry Richmond who recounts it, thus :—

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"Schwartz and I ran to the boat, hauled it on land, and set it keel upward against a low leafy dripping branch. To this place of shelter, protecting her as securely as I could, I led the princess, while Schwartz hopped a rough trench around it with one of the sculls. We started him on foot to do the best thing possible : . . . in truth I knew that I should have been the emissary and he the guard ; but the storm overhead was not fuller of its mighty burden than I of mine. . . . That hour of tempest went swift as one of its flashes over our little nest of peace, where we crouched like insects On me the torrents descended, and her gentle efforts drew me to her side, as with a maternal claim to protect me, or to perish in my arms if the lightning found us It was useless to speak. Her lips were shut, but I had the intent kindness of her eyes on me almost unceasingly.

The good hour slipped away. Old Schwartz's splashed knees on the level of our heads were seen by us when the thunder had abated. Ottilia prepared to rise. 'You shall hear from me,' she said, bending with brows measuring the boat-roof, like a bird about to fly.

'Shall I see you?'

'Ultimately you surely will. Ah! still be patient.'

'Am I not? Have I not been?'

'Yes; and can you regret it?'

'No; but we separate!'

'Would you have us be two feet high for ever?' she



The Little Princess Ottilia

THE ADVENTURES OF HARRY RICHMOND

answered smiling.

‘One foot high, or under earth, if it might be together!’

‘Poor little gnomes!’ said she.

The homeliness of our resting place arrested her for an instant Our heads were hidden.

‘Adieu ! no pledge is needed,’ she said tenderly.

‘None !’ I replied.

She returned to the upper world with a burning blush.”

BEAUCHAMP'S CAREER

Published in 1875

Appeared serially in 1874-5

XII.

RENÉE DE CROISNEL

RENÉE DE CROISNEL—for so one naturally thinks of her, and not by her married title of Marquise de Rouillout—was the daughter of Comte Cresnes de Croisnel, a French nobleman.

It is in Venice that we first meet her—this “brunette of the fine lineaments of the good blood of France”—with a couple of invalids on her hands, her soldier brother, and Nevil Beauchamp who has saved his life in the Crimea, and who accordingly enters upon the scene with a reputation for intrepidity and devotion that has lost nothing at the hands of the narrator.

Let us take our first look at them together as they pass in a gondola—he is reading “The Stones of Venice” for her—the thrice-blessed stones have proved too heavy for her brother Roland, who has therefore been allowed to land:—

“The air flashed like heaven descending for Nevil alone with Renée. They had never been alone before. Such happiness belonged to the avenue of wishes leading to golden mists beyond imagination, and seemed, coming on him suddenly, miraculous. He leaned towards her

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like one who has broken a current of speech, and waits to resume it. She was all unsuspecting indolence, with gravely shadowed eyes.

‘I throw down the book,’ he said.

She objected, ‘No; continue; I like it.’

Both of them divined that the book was there to do duty for Roland.

He closed it, keeping a finger among the leaves; a kind of anchorage in case of indiscretion.”

* * * * *

Renée was Nevil Beauchamp’s romance.

That is why I have chosen her to paint, instead of either Cecilia Halkett, the breezy English girl, or the earnest little lady whom he ultimately married. Lord Illingworth has told us that “a man owes his happiness to the women he has *not* married.” Whether or not that saying may be fittingly applied to Nevil Beauchamp, it is to Renée that I trace a great part of the reader’s happiness in this book.

Let us see how Meredith contrasts her with the fair-haired girl who was in love with Nevil Beauchamp in England:—

“Decidedly Cecilia was the more beautiful; but on which does the eye linger longest—which draws the heart?—a radiant landscape, where the tall ripe wheat flashes between shadow and shine in the stately march of Summer, or the peep into dewy woodland on to deep

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water?" In this we see the Renée of the gravely shadowed eyes, who could make a young man feel her witchery, who could sharpen the wits of Vivian Ducie to give us her likeness in "Young Endor," and could impel the volatile Lord Palmet to express her as "a grand smoky pearl," adding his view that when you do light upon one of them "the milky ones may go and decorate plaster."

We must remember that it was not by any phenomenal beauty that these young men were overthrown; on the contrary Meredith tells us that "dark eyed Renée was not beauty, but attraction; she touched the double chords within us, which are we know not whether harmony or discord."

Renée was possessed of singular charm of speech, even for one of the quick-witted French nation—"thought flew, tongue followed, and the flash of meaning quivered over them like night-lightning. Or oftener, to speak truth, tongue flew, thought followed; her age was but newly seventeen, and she was French."

Let that suffice.



Renée de Croisnel

THE EGOIST

Published in 1879

xiii. CLARA

xiv. LÆTITIA DALE

XIII.

CLARA

CLARA MIDDLETON, you dear, delightful, dutiful but freakish daughter! to you I must speak direct, or rather, I am going to address you in an open letter.

What a desperate predicament for you to have placed your reverend father in! How could you so jeopardize his comfortable equanimity? Your engagement to Sir Willoughby had lodged him in congenial quarters; your fiancé had produced for his special delectation “an aged and a great wine;” but no sooner has it set him chirruping, than to his utter mystification you try, I will not say to break your engagement, but, at least, to persuade Sir Willoughby to release you from it!

Flirt I will not call you, for flirt you never were; but how you *have* played the deuce with us all—with all of us mere men! You helped the unhappy Sir Willoughby on to the horns of a dilemma, and kept him balancing there for an unconscionable time, with nothing but his precious egoism to keep him vertical. And then you calmly watched the rest of your heterogeneous team scrambling to harness themselves

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by their heart-strings to your fantastic chariot—your mercurial colonels, your lean scholars, your racy Irish doctors, your ardent atoms of schoolboy—all's one to you, you dreadful young woman—and now you have flown off to the Tyrol and married old Vernon!

But what about the rest of us, my dear? Are we tamely to settle into our armchairs, and seek consolation in rooting for fine distinctions in your treatment of our rivals? There is not one of us but has received from you, at some time or another, something so flatteringly resembling encouragement, that, in the light of the flame that you yourself had kindled in us, it seemed, *not to look like it*, but unmistakably *to be it*.

Nothing more than a glance, you say?—But a glance can convey a volume. Only a smile?—But what can flatter more than a smile—even the faintest flicker of a smile—if it carry assurance of a confidence divided by two? A mere touch of the hand?—Yes; but a touch of the hand can blot out all the world, my dear.

It was your ready tongue and musical responsiveness that captured us, that made Vernon Whitford liken you to “Mountain Echo,” and that prompted Robert Louis Stevenson to write to W. E. Henley that you were “the best girl he ever saw anywhere;” but which of your moods came to inspire Dr. Corney's fantastic sketch of you as “just the whiff of an idea of a daughter of a peccadillo Goddess,” I do not pretend to understand.



Clara Middleton

THE EGOIST

What clever person was it who said that “a little French dressing would make you at home on the sward by the fountain, among the lutes and whisperers of the bewitching silken shepherdesses who live though they never were?”

That, I suspect, neither of us now know; but we both know that it was Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson that just looked at you in her kindly way, and, without seeking a word, capped you with a perfect fit, “A dainty rogue in porcelain.”

That is *you*, Clara.

Of course we all know that your “eyes waver only in humour, and that they are steady when thoughtfulness is awakened;” we know, too, that you possess an “equable shut mouth,” indeed that is how I have seen you and painted you. But I have read that you came to have “a keener edge for the senses of men than sovereign beauty.” All this, and much more, has your godfather Meredith written in his inimitable way; we know it is all true, and it is like this that we love you; but the thought of you invariably brings to mind Mrs. Mountstuart’s phrase. It was unfortunate for that good lady that it did not quite chime with Sir Willoughby’s predilection, for she was devoted to him. Her *mot* made the egoist strangely uncomfortable. See how he plagued her about it; listen to this duologue thrust upon her by him, and duly recorded for us by our

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"genius of thoughtful laughter :"—

"Why rogue?" he insisted with Mrs. Mountstuart.

"I said—in porcelain," she replied.

"Rogue perplexes me."

"Porcelain explains it."

"She has the keenest sense of honour."

"I am sure she is a paragon of rectitude."

"She has a beautiful bearing."

"The carriage of a young princess!"

"I find her perfect."

"And still she may be a dainty rogue in porcelain."

"Are you judging by the mind or the person, ma'am?"

"Both."

"And which is which?"

"There's no distinction."

"Rogue and mistress of Patterne do not go together."

"Why not? She will be a novelty to our neighbourhood and an animation of the Hall."

"To be frank, rogue does not rightly match with *me*."

"Take her for a supplement."

"You like her?"

"In love with her! I can imagine life-long amusement in her company. Attend to my advice: prize the porcelain and play with the rogue."

Sir Willoughby nodded unilluminated.

* * * * *

THE EGOIST

Indeed, my dear, you were well quit of that “blindly fatuous” gentleman!

See how he positively bled egoism the moment he was scratched: see how he had mislaid his sense of humour; though, to do you justice, I will admit it was not you that scratched him, nor was it you that helped him then to mislay his sense of humour. However, you very soon helped him to lose it outright!



Latitia Dale

XIV.

LÆTITIA DALE

LÆTITIA DALE! Does not the very sound of the name carry with it a suggestion of some refinement of melancholy?

She was a “poetess and portionless”—there’s the rub—the daughter of an invalid army surgeon, retired to a cottage bordering upon Patterne Park, the estate of the wealthy young baronet, Sir Willoughby Patterne.

As a child she and young Willoughby had played together, and as he grew to manhood he came to accept the devotion of the fragile Lætitia as his natural due. There was no disguise nor concealment about her devotion; it was as spontaneously offered as it was graciously accepted.

These two showed at their best when they were together; without effort each drew forth the best that was in the other. True they might drift apart; but only to return parallel again. Her life was always subservient to his, but always in relation with his, if not mingled with it—so much so, indeed, that in order to make our running inspection of *her* milestones we have to travel upon *his* road.

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He came of age; the shy violet emerged from her seclusion with a birthday ode that set the tongues wagging—it was said at the time “she almost proposed to her hero in her rhymes, bold as only your timid creatures can be bold.”

Well would it have been for him had he played the hero, and married the poetess out of hand! But no; he turned about, and sought out Constantia Durham, a budding beauty from the other end of the county—“a racing cutter” the indefatigable Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson labelled her.

We have to chronicle that on the eve of the wedding she jilted him.

He was a little stunned; but not so much as to prevent him returning, we will not say, to his first allegiance, but to accept again *her* first allegiance, Lætitia's, and to discern in her, merits, formerly undiscovered.

After a few months of smouldering courtship, he disappointed the county by setting out to make a tour of the world. Poor Lætitia!

“Here she comes with a romantic tale on her eyelashes.” It is Mrs. Mountstuart that gives us the sketch. Poor Lætitia! she knew everybody pitied her.

After three years Sir Willoughby returns from abroad. Fate ordains Lætitia to be the first person he meets as he is driving home to the Hall. Here is the scene:—

“He sprang to the ground and seized her hand.

THE EGOIST

‘Lætitia Dale!’ he said. He panted. ‘Your name is sweet English music! And are you well?’ The anxious question permitted him to read deeply in her eyes. He found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go.”

This as an exquisite touch for the egoist, and although it rather cheapens Lætitia, I feel compelled to quote it.

He presses her hand, and leaves her with a few ambiguous sentences that to her constant heart could carry only one meaning. But that is nothing to him: “At their next meeting,” we read, “she was ‘Miss Dale.’”

This humble adorer, this heroine of hope-deferred, is thus once more deposited in the waiting-room. Time slips past, and she is content to wait. By an irony of fate she is told of his having praised her as “his image of the constant woman,” precisely at the time when the wretch is once more all for forsaking her. He is aflame for Miss Clara Middleton, “the dainty rogue in porcelain,” ere even her name has reached Lætitia’s ears.

The “constant woman” accepts the inevitable: her resignation is rather touching; but, alas, it is rather spiritless, pitifully spiritless.

Through all the tangles of her hero’s engagement to Clara, Lætitia is kept continually at hand in order to make it easy for Sir Willoughby to shine before his fiancée. Success crowns this ingenious manœuvre on

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the part of the Egoist, for Clara "had never seen him shine so picturesquely as in his bearing with Miss Dale. The sprightly sallies of the two, their rallyings, their laughter, and her fine eyes, and his handsome gestures, won attention like a fencing match of a couple keen with the foils to display their mutual skill."

Poor Lætitia! Constancy must perforce be led forth and exhibited to serve his purpose whatever it be! His magnanimity sometimes gives her, in his imagination, to his cousin, "Old Vernon," the scholar; but on the whole he rather prefers his idea of an arrangement on a more feudal basis:—

"Since his engagement to Miss Middleton, Sir Willoughby's electrically forethoughtful mind has seen in Miss Dale . . . the governess of his infant children, often consulting with him."

Poor Constancy becomes a pathetic figure to us; but never so pathetic as she must have seemed to the Egoist when he so egregiously mistook Clara's disgust at his egoism, and her flutterings towards freedom, for signs of jealousy of Lætitia! Sir Willoughby leapt at this, the only explanation that came within his range of the possibilities. He is speaking of Lætitia to Clara:—

"When you see us together, the natural concord of our minds is of course misleading. She is a woman of genius. I do not conceal, I profess my admiration of her. There are times when, I confess, I require a

THE EGOIST

Lætitia Dale to bring me out, give and take. I am indebted to her for the enjoyment of the duet few know, few can accord with, fewer still are allowed the privilege of playing with a human being I own to a lively friendship with Miss Dale; but if she is displeasing in the sight of my bride by—by the breadth of an eyelash—then”—Sir Willoughby’s arm waved Miss Dale off away into outer darkness in the wilderness.

* * * * *

Poor Egoist! Little thought he how it would all end; but we must follow them all no further.

DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS

Published in 1885

Appeared serially in 1884

xv. DIANA WARWICK

xvi. LADY DUNSTANE



Diana Warwick

XV.

DIANA WARWICK

DIANA ANTONIA, wife of Augustus Warwick, Esq., of The Crossways, Storling, Sussex; director of the Great Railway Company: thus the catalogue description of her portrait. As we read it off, in the usual dry catalogue-voice, it all sounds eminently respectable, not to say dull; and we are on the verge of drifting over-page on the chance of finding a title promising livelier entertainment, when there is a whisper of the "Warwick-Dannisburgh" affair.

We are quickly before the picture.

Is *this* the lady? "Indeed!" is the comment. On the instant the spring of gossip begins to babble:—she "turns out to be Dan Merion's daughter," the wild and witty Irishman. You are incredulous? And her mother half a Spaniard!—These black-haired creatures!—And she has only been married—how many months?—and her name already bandied about with Lord Dannisburgh's!—Considering that at his age he might well be her father!—Yes, but in his youthful days, my dear!—Was it not the Duchess of Berwick that said "Men become old, but they never become good?"—They say she has

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the air of a Greek Goddess, and she is a brilliant talker— But you never know what these too-clever women are up to!—and so forth; and by the time you pass on, you are wading knee-deep in tittle-tattle, and wondering how much less time it would take a Greek Goddess than a full-dressed woman-of-the-world to become “Godiva to the gossips.”

Now let us take a look at the radiant creature through Meredith's spectacles. She was “a queenly comrade, a spirit leaping and shining like a mountain water. She did not seduce, she ravished. The judgment was taken captive and flowed with her, . . . the beautiful dark-eyed, fresh creature, who bore the name of the divine huntress, . . . a true Dian in stature, step and attributes, the genius of laughter superadded. None else on earth so sweetly laughed, none so spontaneously, victoriously provoked the healthful openness. Her delicious chatter, and her museful sparkle in listening, equally quickened every sense of life.”

Is not this a masterpiece of description? It visualizes for us Shelley's line:

A pard-like spirit, beautiful and swift.

It is one among the many passages that could be quoted to justify the view of the critic who wrote that Meredith “paints Diana in all the glowing colours of love. He is not the analyser of Diana; he is her ardent

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lover. He adores her unscrutinisingly, as it behoves the true lover to adore his lady." I beg leave to demur at the "unscrutinisingly"—he certainly scrutinised; but scrutinised delighted. It can doubtless be maintained that he is somewhat more than lenient to her when we reach the very disagreeable transaction to which she lends herself. The incident is almost incredible: we hate to read of it. However, when all is said, it is not that Meredith holds forth to us in palliation of her offence; rather is it that he abstains from expatiating upon the enormity of it. If, however, anyone should still cherish a grievance, let him set against it, on the other side of the scales, our gratitude for the whole study of Diana, which is worked out with unsurpassed splendour and thoroughness, so that surely it were nothing less than curmudgeonly to insist upon his exhibiting her to us smirched from head to heel.

Diana is one of Meredith's creations that has provoked the keenest criticism and the most ardent appreciation; and I propose to quote the following passage from a critique by the late W. E. Henley, contributed to "The Athenæum" in 1885:

"For such a union as she presents of capacity of heart and capacity of brain, of generous nature and fine intelligence, of natural womanhood and more than womanly wit and apprehensiveness, we know not where to look save among Shakespeare's ladies, nor with whom to equal

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her save the genius of Arden. Like Rosalind, she is pure woman Mr. Meredith has wrought from within, and behind his Diana you feel the presence of her maker, as you are aware of Shakespeare when you consort with Rosalind and Hermione Throughout, as with Rosalind, her royal origin is patent like Orlando's mistress, she betrays her parentage in a hundred gallant and inspiring qualities—the quickness and brilliance of her blood, her exquisite and abounding spirit, her delicate vigour of temperament, her swiftness of perception, her generous intensity of emotion She is admirable even in her delusions; you visit her errors with unfailing respect.”

A generous tribute is it not, from one poet to the creation of another! We feel that it wells up spontaneously from his heart, where Diana has taken possession: and surely nothing less noble than Diana could have inspired it.

And now let me gather together a few sayings from Diana's own lips, words that have carried her charm abroad, and helped to make her famous. She says of Poetry:—“Those that have souls meet their fellows there.”

Of Life, she says:—“When I fail to cherish it in every fibre, the fires within are waning:”

Of Romance: “The young who avoid that region escape the title of Fool at the cost of a celestial crown.”

This is how she expresses what we all—like Lord

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Fleetwood—imagine we ourselves have thought, when she tells us:—

“Prose can paint evening and moonlight; but poets are needed to sing the dawn. That is because prose is equal to melancholy stuff. Gladness requires the finer language. Otherwise we have it coarse—anything but a reproduction.” Again: “We women miss life only when we have to confess we have never met the man to reverence.”

And finally:—She told him she read rapidly, “a great deal at one gulp, and thought in flashes—a way with the makers of phrases . . . of which lapidary sentences she said they had merely the value of chalk-eggs, which lure the thinker to sit.”

XVI.

LADY DUNSTANE

LADY DUNSTANE, Diana's friend—her Emma—was also her protecting Goddess. Meredith describes her as “deeply a woman and dumbly a poet.”

It has been held that there is more harm done in the world by *not being kind* than by the whole sum of downright unkindness. Lady Dunstane is the personification of *being kind*. “Her heart was at the head of her thoughts,” says Meredith.

A permanent invalid, serenely-minded, we are told, surcharged with “strength of meditative vision,” the author permits of our becoming witnesses of the positive good accomplished by an active mind in a necessarily passive body. Diana has given her to us in one of her lapidary sentences: “She is perpetually in the antechamber of death, and her soul is perennially sunshine.”

Emma loves her Diana with a whole-hearted devotion, and Diana's to her is no less. Their relation is perhaps the most ideal and beautiful of the several friendships between women that Meredith has drawn for us. There is something touchingly maternal in Emma's attitude of protection toward the younger woman, and in her pride

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in seeing Diana shine—shew her “iridescent humour.”

The succeeding fragment from a conversation between Diana and her half-encouraged, half-chilled admirer, Percy Dacier, gives us an idea of how generous a tribute she could pay to her friend:—

“You have met Lady Dunstane?”

Dacier answered that he thought he had seen her somewhere once

“She is the *cœur d’or* of our time.”

“A bit of a blue stocking, I think I have heard said.”

“She might have been admitted to the Hotel Rambouillet, without being anything of a *Précieuse*. She is the woman of the largest heart now beating.”

“Mr. Redworth talked of her.”

“As she deserved, I am sure.”

“Very warmly.”

“He would!”

“He told me you were the Damon and Pythias of women.”

“Her one fault is an extreme humility that makes her always play second to me : and as I am apt to gabble, I take the lead ; and I am froth in comparison. I can reverence my superiors even when tried by intimacy with them. She is the next heavenly thing to Heaven that I know. Court her, if you ever come across her. Or have you a man’s horror of women with brains?”



Lady Dunstane

DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS

“Am I expressing it?” said he.

* * * * *

We will allow Lady Dunstane a rejoinder by quoting a few words of hers to Thomas Redworth, spoken at a time when Diana's was a position terribly susceptible of being misunderstood:—

“You know our love. She (Diana) is the best of me, heart and soul She is one of Shakespeare's women I dream of him seeing her with that eye of steady flame. The bravest and best of us at bay in the world need an eye like his to read deep, and not be baffled by inconsistencies.”

Redworth is to be the trusted messenger with a letter to Diana. It consists of but a few lines; but this dear woman, who could speak with but an invalid's voice, could write with her heart's blood.

Fascinating as would be the task of following this ideal friendship through their two lives, of recounting their actions and re-actions, the one upon the other, or even of recapitulating the incidents that permit of our fathoming the depth of the love between them, this is unfortunately not the place for it. Let it suffice to say that when we have read the novel to its end—where the author gallantly allows Emma the last word—and one, too, that draws happy tears—we can fathom for ourselves

How great was Meredith's love for his Diana,
To find her such a friend.

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For a last look at them together, let us choose the bridal morning, when Diana is to wed with her true mate. Emma must needs superintend the bride's adornment, and the two friends have spoken of her re-ascent from out the valley of shadows, toward the hilltops :

"You are beginning to think hopefully again?" And Emma's simple question, born of a mighty tenderness, draws from her friend a fine passage, the last I need to quote, seeing that it sums up "my Emma's history." It is contained in a great saying "straight from the heart of deep thoughts :"—

"Who can really *think*," she says, "and not think hopefully? You were in my mind last night, and you brought a little boat to sail me past despondency of life and the fear of extinction. When we despair or discolour things, it is our senses in revolt, and they have made the sovereign brain their drudge. I heard you whisper, with your very breath in my ear, *There is nothing the body suffers that the soul may not profit by.* It is my Emma's history. With that I sail into the dark, it is my promise of the immortal."

ONE OF OUR CONQUERORS

Published in 1892

Appeared Serially in 1890

XVII.

NESTA VICTORIA

NESTA VICTORIA. "There was a cascade of muslin downstairs"—and we are presented to Nesta Victoria, than whom there is no more fearless figure in our literature. She was "a girl of singularly lucid and receptive eyes," and the pet—sometimes the alarming pet—of the little clique gathered around her father and mother. It was a clique interesting and exclusive—necessarily exclusive we learn later.

To her mother, Nesta was the adored source of constant dread, for in her parent bosom there lurked a fact, that had, sooner or later, to be communicated, with what effect upon her child she dreaded to forecast.

For her adoring father, Nesta—or Fredi as he pet-named her—was

All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag of one bee ;
All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the heart of one gem.

She was for him a gem beyond price ; and adopting the simile, as we well may, she was a gem that was cut to many facets—as so precious a gem should be cut—and to each *habitué* of the circle, according to his mind's

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angle of inclination, she presented all unconsciously, a different facet.

Let us collect a few of the reflections and refractions given by these differing facets to different people.

Nataly, her mother, was not one given to talking of her feelings, so let us pass on to her father, Victor Montgomery Radnor—the immensely successful city magnate, biassed in her favour, as he had every right to be :

“I declare,” said he, “she helps one to think. It’s not precocity ; it’s healthy enquiry. She brings me nearer ideas of my own, not yet examined, than anyone else does. I say, what a wife for a man !”

He could none the less admit himself thoroughly alarmed at the prospect of having to use the word “forbid” to her. “You’re dealing with Nesta Victoria,” he says to Dartrey Fenellan. “Spare me a contest with that girl, I undertake to manage any man or woman living.” But we must not forget that he, no less than her mother, was queasy in his conscience concerning her.

“You innocent !” says Mrs. Judith Marsett to her, “I’ve heard tell of ‘crystal clear,’ but eyes like yours have to tell me how deep and clear.”

And again Mrs. Marsett—a woman near to “going under the world’s waggon-wheels”—to whom a few words from a pellucid mind like Nesta’s meant much :

“I thought, well, for a girl she’s bold ! I thought

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you knew more than a girl ought to know; until, you did, you set my heart going."

To the Honourable Dudley Sowerby, who was in love with her in his rather priggish way, "his intelligence and senses gave her the form and glory of young morning." This is not bad for the Hon. Dudley. We are told he habitually wore the look of a "sick falcon," and one must not expect too much from so unpromising an exterior; but later, when the inevitable disclosure held him halting between two opinions, he discovered, or thought he discovered, that "she had Enigma's mouth, with the eyes of morning."

For Captain Dartrey Fenellan (the younger brother of her father's old crony Simeon) "she had a nature pure and sparkling as mid-sea foam."

This gives us a fair range of deviation, but as we began with Victor Radnor, let us round all off with his comfortable thought that "She was a young woman easily pleased, but hardly enthralled." No doubt the losing of such a delightful house-sprite would be a wrench to him, when it came: he would sadly miss her "delicious warble of the prattle running rill-like over our daily hum-drum."

Of the suitors for her hand we hear most of the Hon. Dudley—a vacillating individual who never succeeds in living down the first mental picture that we have of him from Victor Radnor in "a bald cupid."

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There is also the Reverend Septimus Barmby of the resounding bass voice, whose suit is supposed to be encouraged by mamma; but of course she marries neither of these comedy figures; indeed we perceive that there is likely to be some difficulty about her marriage.

With the facts surrounding her birth disclosed to us, we realize that their revelation to Nesta must prove a desperate ordeal to the high-spirited girl—and to her parents! They had “walked on planks” for twenty years; but she had been a swallow by the shore of the Dead Sea.

As they watched her growing towards womanhood, the falseness of her position became to their imagination a charged mine beneath her. No matter how they might lap her in luxury, no matter how they might lavish upon her the wealth of their affection, they could not forget—her mother, *never*—that there was this mine that had to be fired—fired by the hand of love.

We can imagine the sanguine Victor telling himself that if this duty to his girl—for he knows it his duty—could only be discreetly *discharged*—horrible word with the mine always beneath us!

What would he not give to save his adored girl the shock—the shock and the tumble from the height of her present false security, down to the rocks, perhaps to the pit!—But the art of exploding a bomb tenderly!



Nesta Victoria

ONE OF OUR CONQUERORS

ONE OF OUR CONQUERORS

Romantic had been his scaling of the heights of love, enchanting his sojourn in the grove; but the task of explaining it all after twenty years to that clear-eyed daughter of his! *Attack* was Victor's strength—in that he was well nigh irresistible—but in defence he was by no means invulnerable. Here he could but defend—and should Nesta choose to attack!

The oft-imagined spectral face of the accuser probably left him at peace when he was immersed in his daily affairs; but from Nataly's mind it was never absent; and it was from *her* that Nesta was destined to learn the truth; for when at length she had half inferred it, half guessed it, it was to her mother that the intrepid girl flew for enlightenment.

And then, if it be nobility of mind that touches us, must we indeed be moved by the sequel.

LORD ORMONT AND HIS AMINTA

Published in 1894

XVIII.

AMINTA

AMINTA—Aminta Farrell, to be precise—was dark enough for rumour to guess at her as a Spaniard.

We are accustomed to meeting our heroines young in George Meredith's world, and Aminta is no exception. She is a pupil at Miss Vincents' Seminary for Young Ladies—and we may, if we choose, see her pass in the "swarm" mentioned in the opening paragraph of the book. It takes us into the *school* atmosphere at once—let me quote it:—

"A procession of schoolboys having to meet a procession of schoolgirls on the Sunday's dead march, called a walk . . . could hardly go by without dropping to a hum in its chatter, and the shot of incurious half-eyes at the petticoated creatures—all so much of a swarm unless you stare at them like lanterns. . . . The girls, who sped their peep of inquisition before the moment of transit, let it be seen that they had minds occupied with thoughts of their own. Our gallant fellows forgot the intrusion of the foreign body as soon as it had passed."

The neighbouring boys' school, Mr. Cuper's, was a healthy one, owing to the influence of the head boy—

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Matthew Weyburn—Matey for short. True there was a “tradition of an usher and governess leering sick eyes until they slunk away round a corner and married;” but we may take it that at Cuper’s, at the period of the beginning of the story, the genus *girl*, if not thought little of, was at least little thought of.

But a change comes to the school, a wave of *girl* sweeps over it, especially over the boys of the upper school; and it is Matey Weyburn who is directly responsible for this change, for is he not seen exchanging glances with that dark well-grown girl who “usually made the left of the second couple from the front line” of young ladies from Miss Vincents’ establishment! One recalls Aurora Leigh’s idea of the first glance exchanged between her own father and mother. It was in Florence, while he stood aside to watch the passing of a religious procession:—

From that long trail of chanting priests and girls,
A face flashed like a cymbal on his face,
And shook with silent clangour brain and heart,
Transfiguring him to music.

It is a far cry from the pomp of Florence’s priestly procession to the weekly shepherding of our young school friends through the park; but none the less completely on that account do we realize the “silent clangour” that smote upon the hearts of Aminta and Matey Weyburn, rendered as it is in Meredithian touches

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at once direct and delicious.

Aminta, whose flush of “dark brown-red late-sunset” led to her being spoken of among Cuper’s boys as Brownny, became for the time the centre of their interest outside the school; and was, so soon as they could reconcile themselves to her foreign-sounding name, acclaimed by them as the acceptable if not precisely the predestined mate for the captain of the school.

But the thought of a sinecure is abhorrent to healthy boys, and a position conferring such distinction demanded something more than the mere flash of eyes. And so it fell out that on the occasion of the meeting of the two schools in the cricket-meadow—when, for the first time, Aminta was seen all round, and had her chance of rising to the height of the boys’ loyal anticipations—she failed utterly. It was not anything that she did, and did badly; it was that she did nothing.

Her fall, though sudden, was silent; she dropped out of fashion, she slipped out of mind,—“The flush that had swept across the school withered to a dry recollection.”

Of course all this applies to *the boys*, and not to *the boy*; but for Cuper’s school, Aminta ceased to exist—the common enthusiasm that must be provided with a deity, swung round, jumped sex, and prostrated itself before the great Lord Ormont—the ideal leader of our cavalry, and for the moment the darling of the public.

Boys are thorough in their devotions or they are

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nothing. So Brownny was dethroned and General Lord Ormont reigned in her stead.

We will now make a skip of a few years, and cull a phrase or two from the heart of the lover, where a whole rose-garden of them is growing, in tribute to Aminta's eyes: (Thus the Scene:—"Lord Ormont presented his new secretary to the lady, 'Mr. Weyburn,' he said with a light wave of his hand, and a murmur that might be the lady's title.") This is how they appeared to Weyburn:

"They were large eyes, eyes of southern night. They sped no shot; they rolled forth an envelopment." "They were known beautiful eyes, in a foreign land of night and mist;" and again:—"They quickened throbs; they seemed a throb of the heart made visible."

It is not forgotten that Lord Ormont—the dashing cavalry leader, the victor of a great campaign, the darling of the British public and the terror of the War Office—had been the soldier-hero of our school days. At that time there had not been wanting rumours of duels following upon certain episodes . . . but the boys had "revelled in the devilish halo of skirts on the whirl encircling Lord Ormont's laurelled head."

And after these years Weyburn meets him face to face, to find a veteran with a grievance—well past sixty, a heroic sixty if you will, but scarcely a genial. Is he married to this girl "in her twenties"—to his school-days' Brownny, who looks like a sedate elder sister of *his*



Aminta

LORD ORMONT AND HIS AMINTA

LORD ORMONT AND HIS AMINTA

Browny?

“How did that lady of nights’ eyes come to fall under his subjection? He put no question to the name she bore; it hung in a black suspense—vividly at its blackest illuminated her possessor.”

The chapter is named “Recognition;” it fascinates, but leaves an uneasy feeling that I will not attempt to analyse. The lover has found again his school-days’ sweetheart! but wedded, he soon learns, to Lord Ormont! wedded, but not proclaimed—a target for the tattlers to aim at!

“Two days later she came . . . as before, met Weyburn’s eyes when he raised them; gave him no home in hers—not a temporary shelter from the pelting of interrogations. She hardly spoke.”

This is how Meredith sets forth her position *vis à vis* Lord Ormont:—

“Her will could not turn him, nor her tongue combat; nor was it granted her to pique the mailed veteran. Every poor innocent little bit of an art had been exhausted. Her title was Lady Ormont; her condition actually slave. A luxuriously established slave, consorting with a singularly enfranchised set.”

In this delicate and perplexing position, Aminta had none to advise her, saving that super-goose, her aunt, who invariably pressed the inadvisable upon her. But fortunately she “was one born to prize rectitude, to walk

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on the traced line uprightly ; and while the dark rose” might overflow “the soft brown of her cheeks,” none knew it, none prized it, none loved it so utterly as Weyburn.

And here we leave the Gordian Knot.

THE AMAZING MARRIAGE

Published in 1895

Appeared serially in 1895

xix. CARINTHIA JANE

xx. THE COUNTESS LIVIA

XIX.

CARINTHIA JANE

CARINTHIA JANE is the heroine of "The Amazing Marriage," and the daughter of an amusing one, that I must undoubtedly outline here, if only for the sake of giving an idea of the sprightliness of Dame Gossip, who is responsible for the story.

Before her second marriage, then, Carinthia's mother was celebrated as the Countess of Cressett—"the beautiful but naughty Countess of Cressett," of *Nymney's Letters and Correspondence*; the writers of such things, says Meredith, lead you to "imagine that they know everything, and they are so indulgent when they drop their blot on a lady's character!"

Her father, Captain John Avason Kirby, was popularly known as the Old Buccaneer, of whom it was said that "he was never so much at home as in a ship foundering or splitting into the clouds." He was a magnificent old sea-warrior of six feet four, and "used to be compared to a three-decker entering harbour after a victory."

When, then, we know that the beautiful young Countess was "all heart for a real hero," it would be

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inhuman to ask us to turn our backs upon his hurricane-first-encounter of his future bride.

Here is Mistress Gossip's account of it:—

“So the Countess Fanny looked round. Kirby was doing the same. But he had turned right about, and appeared transfixed and like a royal beast angry with his wound. If ever there was love at first sight, and a dreadful love, like a runaway mailcoach in a storm of wind and lightning at black midnight by the banks of a flooded river, which was formerly our comparison for terrible situations, it was when those two met.”

After a beginning of such calibre, anything short of an elopement amidst insuperable difficulties would reek of timorousness; and we feel we are but fairly treated when we learn of the Old Buccaneer issuing his threat to carry off the lady despite her husband and all his and her relations, amongst whom we may well picture a terrible to-do. “When he comes, I am ready and will go with him,” were her gallant words. She would be a good match for his boldness. Kirby swore publicly he would carry her off, and went so far as to proclaim the date and hour for the adventure. The popular imagination was inflamed to red-heat; and the thing became the subject of wagers involving tens of thousands. Let it here suffice to say that those who laid their odds against the Old Buccaneer lost their money; and the heroic couple—not without an appropriate episode of pistols on

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their road to the coast—were soon after heard of as duly married abroad—we must skip the details, though they are delightfully picturesque and characteristic of everyone concerned, including the narrator.

Here, surely, we have a sufficiently remarkable parentage for our heroine to satisfy the most *exigeant* reader! But Carinthia fully justifies it. Before we close the volume she is of proved eminence even in her distinguished company of Meredith heroines.

Hers was destined to be a tragic life; one which, if not actively tempestuous, could only be confined within the bounds that prevented its so becoming by the exercise of heroic self-repression and of her supreme capacity for bearing pain.

The *Amazing Marriage* is her marriage with Lord Fleetwood; a marriage entered into on her side in unquestioning confidence in a man almost unknown to her—unknown, be it said, to one who at the time knew no one—on his side, carried out in redemption of his pledged word, given in haste and regretted within the hour. Read the bridegroom's thoughts of his bride on their wedding day:—

“She had beauty—of its kind . . . But it bore no name. None of her qualities—if they were qualities—had a name . . . Pain breathed out of her, and not a sign of pain was visible . . . She drew the breath of pain through the lips; red lips and well cut. Her brown

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eyes were tearless, not alluring or beseeching or repelling : they did but look, much like the skies opening high aloof on a wreck of storm. Her reddish hair—chestnut if you will—let fall a skein over one of the rugged brows, and softened the ruggedness by making it wilder . . . Conceived of the mountains, built in their image, the face partook alternately of mountain terror or splendour ; wholly, be remembered, of the splendour when her blood ran warm.”

We cannot but pity, at this stage, the prisoner of his word. Carinthia's was one of those faces that, while having no place in the ranks of beautiful women, could at times outshine them by the very luxuriance of her vitality.

She was capable of giving impressions differing so widely as to appear grotesquely at variance : but is not that in a great measure due to the more real differences in the persons receiving and reproducing their impressions ?

Thus the Countess Livia, the recognised beauty, could think of her merely as “the red-haired gaunt girl of the mountains,” though it is only just to the Countess to add that this was after a casual first inspection under adverse conditions.

A very different first-impression was received by Gower Woodseer, the young poet to whom Carinthia and her brother played good Samaritan in the mountains. In his notebook we find : “A beautiful Gorgon, a haggard



Carinthia Jane

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Venus."

This is what he told Lord Fleetwood of her at their first meeting :—

"She goes into the blood, she is a new idea of women. She has a face that would tempt a gypsy to evil tellings. I could think of it as a history written in a line : Carinthia, Saint and Martyr."

It is this young face to *tempt a gypsy to evil tellings*, that I have had in mind and essayed to paint ; but there are other aspects. How reconcile Lord Fleetwood's grudging admission that she had "a kind of thwarted beauty" with Admiral Fakenham's whole-hearted "She has the eyes for a man to swear by!" Or in what way solve the seeming inconsistency between Fleetwood's idea of her "savage poignancy of serenity" and the Admiral's laconic "She's my tonic!"

"Regrets were at no time her nestlings," writes Meredith, and one is happy at being able to trace this characteristic, among others, to "Maxims for Men," her father's book, a potential classic, from which it is hard to part without making quotations. That would be, however, to wander beyond the legitimate boundaries of this note ; for indeed I am unable even to trace here the tragic course of Carinthia's life until she is safely arrived in harbour ; but must content myself with recording that as one follows her deeds and her thoughts, it is gradually to realize her as unshakeably installed in the heart, truly a

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great personality, a tragic compound of strength and tenderness.

Happy he
With such a mother ! faith in womankind
Beats in his blood, and trust in all things high
Comes easy to him, and tho' he trip and fall,
He shall not blind his soul with clay.

XX.

THE COUNTESS LIVIA

THE COUNTESS LIVIA—the young but all unwilling Dowager—was thrice married; first, to Lord Duffield, second, to the Earl of Fleetwood, whose heir was almost of her own age. At twenty-eight we find her a widow for the second time, and it is at this, her mid-matrimonial stage, that we see most of her ladyship.

We will take our first look at her through the eyes of the youthful poet-philosopher, Gower Woodseer, merely premising that his state at the moment is one of unusual supersensitiveness :—

“He found himself bowing to a most heavenly lady, composed of day and night in her colouring, but more of night, where the western edge has become a pale steel blade. . . . Men were around her forming a semi-circle. The world of men and women was mere timber and leafage to this flower of her sex, glory of her kind She was a miracle of greyness, her eyes translucently grey, a dark-haired queen of the twilights.”

Yet the background for these cool wood-notes of

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description is a brilliantly lit gaming-saloon of Black-Forest-Baden, "sprightliest of the antechambers of Hades."

In the Countess Livia we see an inveterate gambler; but in deference to her station of great-lady, she was willing to deny herself the indulgence of staking at the tables in person, her preference and her practice being to employ for that purpose one or other of her numerous satellites—among whom we may mention Captain Abrane, the giant guardsman of the high-pitched voice—"a colossus inactive;" Sir Meeson Corby, the tight-buttoned little beau of forty, perpetually at war with his fat; M. de St. Ombre, a stately French cavalier with a Guise beard; the pragmatistical Chumley Potts, and poor Ambrose Mallard, who had not a chance—"never had in anything." Invariably unlucky of course they were not; and, although their Countess managed to lose considerable sums of money, she returned periodically with the other "devotees of the sable goddess to perform sacrifice . . . for nowhere else had she sensation of the perfect repose which is rocked to a slumber by gales. She was not of the creatures who are excited by an atmosphere of excitement; she took it as a nymph of the stream her native wave . . . She could make for herself a quiet centre in the heart of the whirlwind; but the whirlwind was required."

She could the better afford this luxury, as the

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millionaire Lord Fleetwood, her erratic stepson, could be relied upon for the necessary cheques to liquidate her losses; but to him she was a source of perpetual anxiety; and, as the story runs its course, we see he would fain have her safely married for a third time, beyond the reach of debts and devotees.

“She had these marvellous eyes and the glamour for men . . . All admitted the glamour; none of her courtiers were able to name it . . . To her giant squire the eyes of the lady were queer: they were unlit glass lamps to her French suppliant; and to the others, they were attractively uncommon; the charm for them being in her fine outlines, her stature, carriage of her person, and unalterable composure; particularly her latent daring.”

After this, any further description is unnecessary; but I should like to add a phrase that fell from a clever woman to whom I shewed my version of Livia—“Yes,” said she, “that is the kind of woman that is eternally making-eyes at you and does not know it: and the question is *how far she does not know it.*”

We are glad, finally, to hear of Livia's marriage to the young Earl of Cressett (“In time,” snapped Lady Arpington), and we read of it as being “an extraordinary instance of a thrice married woman corrected of her addiction to play by her alliance with a rakish juvenile.” But before taking leave of the Countess, I must not omit

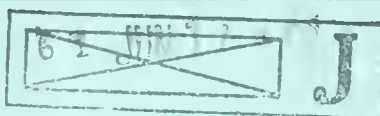
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to recall a good flying-shot of Gower Woodseer's, when he spoke of her as "Diana seated:" it hits the mark neatly; but personally I prefer "the Reveller's Aurora."

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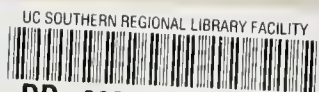
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